

## **BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE – INSIGHTS FROM TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

A teaching assistant (TA) is someone who supports teachers and students in the classroom. In general, the role of a TA can vary widely depending on the school, grade level, and specific needs of the classroom. Some common responsibilities of a teaching assistant may include assisting with instructions, for example with instructional activities, such as working with small groups of students, providing one-on-one assistance, and helping to explain concepts. A TA may also be used to assist classroom management, to help maintain a productive and orderly classroom environment by managing student behavior and reinforcing classroom rules. A TA may also assist in preparing e. g. written materials for hand-outs and other resources for lessons, such as setting up equipment, organizing materials, and ensuring supplies are ready. TA resource may also be used to support the special needs students in inclusive classrooms, TAs often work closely with students who have special needs, providing individualized support and adapting materials as needed thus alleviating the teacher's resource. Teaching assistants play a crucial role in enhancing the learning experience for students and supporting teachers in creating an effective educational environment. How is the situation in higher education institutes? Our university employs senior students for the positions 'to oversee' the younger ones. In addition to the previously mentioned, the duties may, and often do, also include assessment of assignments and communications with the students in premeditated areas, such as the assignment or schedules related questions. The challenging situations may arise when there is a deliverable to be read and evaluated from a peer of the TA. Thus, the work field of the TA is rather versatile and demanding. How do the TA's perceive their position? Seems that personal attitude and integrity play a significant role. An additional interesting question is, how are they chosen for the job and later allocated to the individual courses? In addition to motivation to take part in higher education, one of the most used qualifications in allocating is having accomplished successfully the course for which a TA is sought for. How are all the assignments on courses handled objectively and fairly? Are they? This paper asks such questions and sheds light upon the previously unasked questions how a TA handles such situations and individual sentiments by interviewing a number of TAs from various courses with altering responsibilities. The answers deepen the understanding of this invaluable staff group at our university.

**Keywords:** *Higher education, teaching assistant role, insights.*

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### **1. Introduction**

Higher education is about an educator, like a lecturer or a professor, teaching the subject matter, originally executed by the teacher by reading the material out loud from a book and the students trying to take notes and/or remember the essence and simultaneously already starting to internalize the content. At those times the mere existence of books was scarce. Secretarial staff was there to take care of most of the administrative part. Today the situation is something completely different, development has been, and is, constant (Berggren et al., 2015; Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991; Hellsten and Kallionpää, 2023). Also, with diminishing or rationalized resources, the amount of administrative duties has come to the teaching staff. Similarly, the teaching methods have evolved, during the past years at an ever-increasing pace, into something unprecedented. The universities and teachers therein have had to come up with new ways of executing their task and to keep up with the developments (Kallionpää and Hellsten, 2023). Information is there in abundance. Division of labor has come, actually already a long time ago, into higher education (Feinman, 1991; Sharples et al., 2018). One form of this is the use of teaching assistants (TA). A teaching assistant may mean an undergraduate student or a specifically for this purpose hired person to alleviate the tasks and burdens of the responsible staff member, the teacher (Sharples et al., 2018).

As the use of teaching assistants in our unit at the university is considered, it starts when the permanent teaching staff is required to express their presumed need for teaching assistants to the responsible person in the unit. The person then sums up the combined need and having considered the overall need, formulates the call for assistants and releases it through proper channels to the students to react upon. It is obvious that the persons are not to be chosen light-heartedly for the position but rather a strict process needs to be in place to make sure that the objectivity and fairness are maintained in executing the various tasks that are bestowed upon the teaching assistant, but also in the recruiting phase. However, this aspect is marked out from this study as it merits more attention than is possible on this occasion. Another aspect that is relevant but not included in closer scrutiny is the variety and various ways the permanent teaching staff sees the possible duties and tasks for a teaching assistant in various courses on their responsibility.

Our bachelor's and master's programs at the university have both a number courses, as they do. Quite often the courses have the lectures, rather obvious in higher education, as a teaching method to deliver the message but also additional assignments to deepen the internalizing of the essence. At our university we publish the individual courses on a learning platform. This is quite often also the primary communication channel for the courses. There are also other information systems for the teacher to use and preferably to master; a sort of register system into which the course details and structures are to be typed into, students enroll also via this system onto the various classes. There is also an independent course feedback system with standard questions but also into which a teacher may or may not add his/her own questions, to name but a few. By this short listing the varied field of tools and tasks is demonstrated. The tasks that a TA may or may not have varies quite a bit according to the person in charge. Typically, however, the upkeep of the learning platform for a certain course more or less independently or reading and assessing the assignments are such tasks, as traditional written examination has long been the primary method of assessing student performance in higher education. Also, a TA may operate as a contact point for the courses running errands, such as answering questions about deadlines and extensions to them and such.

The duties and the role itself of a teacher are studied and reported in journals (Eekelen et al., 2005; Unwin, 2007; Walker and Gleaves, 2016). What about the teacher's vital support? We got interested in teaching assistants and their thoughts of their activities as they play a big, sometimes even a crucial role in whether a course is deemed a success or not. They do alleviate the teachers' pressures and free time for the teachers for perhaps even more subject-related tasks, how do they see themselves in this academic equation, and how could their job be made if not exactly easier but more friction-free?

This paper looks at the opinions and prerequisites the teaching assistants feel for themselves to have. The paper is studying the students' viewpoint. The notions and the mere viewpoint to the issue are versatile. Both sides need to be taken into account. There are additionally some notions from the permanent teachers included, to verify or to offer a counterpoint to statements if need be. TA activities require TA-students to assume authority over their peers even, to verbally articulate their understanding of the subject matter and respond to various questions presented with, offering a dynamic and interactive approach to various situations, whilst the staff member is there in background to offer support when needed. The way of operating may also allow for the assessment of verbal communication of the students on the courses but especially the written assignments handed in. The benefits and challenges associated with the use TA's, this paper aims to illuminate the bigger picture of this approach in higher education setting to better reflect students' true capabilities as a part of university community.

## 2. Design

Currently we have 17 teaching assistants enrolled. All of them have at least one year more on their record than the students on the course on which they are attached to. The courses cater for a variety of subject matters under knowledge management (KM) umbrella; basics in KM, data administration, CIO's office, knowledge-based management, strategic KM, knowledge-intensive services, to name but a few. The target group for the study was the entire number of current assistants. The enrollment was 17, out of which 13 answers were received. Obviously, the number of respondents could, and perhaps even should have been bigger. Having said that, it is noteworthy that the responses began to saturate already with these numbers.

A questionnaire was designed with 26 questions regarding the views and sentiments of the students about the work as a teaching assistant, which we then sent to the intended respondents. The responding took on average approximately 40 minutes. There were questions with statements with which the respondent could either strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5) and open-ended questions to further enlighten the numeric responses. The open-ended questions give the study a touch of qualitative nature. Five involved teachers have taken part in conversations regarding the work TA's do to give additional empirical matter over the area under scrutiny. The questions were planned keeping in mind the position of the TA's in between the 'normal' students, as they possess a sort of position of power over their peers and the permanent academic staff, which TA's are not.

There were questions about the motivation to apply for and to act as a TA. Also, about the possibilities of the individual's TA's to do the work whilst studying. Obviously, the work is supposed not to harm or hinder the progress of one's own studies, but an equilibrium is to be found, preferably independently. An interesting fact may be that as the counterpart at university unit may be a professor, an university lecturer or an university teacher, it seems to play no role whatsoever to the TA's and to their approach. This has had a confirmation in prior observations. The paper scrutinizes the students' viewpoint and gives also some notions on the approach the teaching staff have towards this way of working.

### 3. Background

The Tampere University community was established through the merger of the former Tampere University of Technology, the University of Tampere, and Tampere University of Applied Sciences. This merger took effect at the beginning of 2019, coinciding with the transfer of ownership of the University of Applied Sciences from the city of Tampere to the newly formed Tampere University. The individual universities were founded in the 1960s, while the origins of the University of Applied Sciences date back even further.

The newly formed university encompasses nearly all internationally recognized fields of study, with a strong focus on research and education in technology, health, and society. Tampere University is one of the most multidisciplinary universities in Finland, boasting a vibrant community of approximately 32,000 students and over 5,000 staff members across seven faculties. The university operates on three main campuses in Tampere, Finland's third-largest city, and has three university centers in Lahti, Pori, and Seinäjoki to address more localized needs.

This paper focuses on the teaching activities at the Hervanta campus, which was primarily the domain of the former University of Technology. It is important to note that the university has made significant efforts to ensure uniformity across all campuses, so the observations in this paper are likely applicable to other parts of the university as well, even if cultural differences between the campuses are occasionally noted. The Hervanta campus is particularly known for its state-of-the-art facilities and its emphasis on engineering and technology disciplines.

The daily routines of the teaching staff often include research work and research-related tasks, with few individuals able to focus solely on one area. The pedagogical and didactic expertise of the staff varies, as many individuals come from research backgrounds. Similarly, the technical proficiency of staff members ranges from those who use basic tools like PowerPoint and PDFs to those who are adept with advanced features of learning platforms. The tasks of the staff can be broadly categorized into teaching (the main focus of this paper), research, and administrative duties. The latter category is somewhat ambiguous, as it may or may not be connected to the other two areas.

In addition to their teaching responsibilities, staff members are often involved in various administrative roles, such as curriculum development, student advising, and participation in university committees. These roles require a diverse skill set and the ability to balance multiple responsibilities. The university supports its staff through professional development programs aimed at enhancing both their teaching and research capabilities.

### 4. Findings

Among the respondents there are bachelor's degree holders but also students not yet having accomplished that degree. One qualification in choosing a person for a TA position is whether s/he has completed the course a TA is sought for. In their application the applicants are asked onto which courses they would want to be allocated. These wishes are taken into consideration, as they are thought to be an additional motivational factor.

As described above, the TA tasks included communicating with the students almost in all the responses. Similarly, the assignments were there in multiple answers, however what does this exactly mean in every response, remains a little unclear. As the array of the possible tasks is rather dependent on the teachers' willingness and possibilities to instruct and to allocate tasks and responsibilities. They in some cases include instructing exercise sessions, in some cases even planning for these, assessing in some. Administrative tasks were also included in some cases, meaning the maintenance of the learning platform and updating the info's there.

When asked after their motivation for the position the overall grade was 4,54 (out of 1-5). The respondents strongly agreed (7) and agreed (6). As individual motivating factors the possibility to see what working in a university is like gathered many mentions but also the experience to be active in one's chosen field of studies and simultaneously learn more. Also to learn more work life skills, such as presenting and performing, managing groups etc. were mentioned.

The TA's recognized as major skills they need in their line of work to be literary skills, such as scientific writing (also reading), which is easily understood, should instructing and reading the assignments be among the duties allocated to a TA. To be a people person is an advantage, one has a lot to do with people, social, communication, and interpersonal skills are of value. Beneficial features of more general nature such as self- and time management were also mentioned multiple times as was project management type of skills. Self-evidently the subject matter of the course on which the person is working as a TA give the necessary backbone to exercise the mentioned skills.

As to the balancing the studying with the working as a TA, the respondents were very confident in assessing their capabilities in this. The overall grade was again 4,54, which for faculty member makes pleasing reading. Seven respondents agreed strongly and six agreed with the statement. When asked how the TA's accomplish this balancing act, they answer that they need to exercise time management and planning, allocate certain days or time slots to say the least in their calendar. The allocating included among other features the responding to students' emails. This, reportedly, is advisable to be done not immediately by arrival of the mail, but rather in an organized manner in the reserved time frame, for example at a certain hour of the day. Also noting that the most productive hours are beneficial to be allocated for the tasks prioritized higher.

The inquiry regarded also the induction to the duties. This is to be developed. One respondent was of the opinion that this was inadequate. Understandably the instructing is to be taken seriously and planned accordingly. It is not a good start for any new position, should there be unclarities about what and how the related tasks are to be done. Especially for a young person with not much experience. The average grade was 3,92, which is to be interpreted so that there were better performances too. The adequacy was asked, four responses agreed strongly, five agreed, and three answered with grade 3. Conversational approach with the permanent teacher was said to be preferred also due to the nature where one could better express oneself. The conversations covered the overall objectives, the ways to consider the tasks, but also more detailed approaches like how to grade assignments etc. It is to be remembered that also the facts regarding the employment itself need to be included in the induction. Peer support seemed to be invaluable, also that of the more experienced TA's and also from other courses. More support was to be received mainly from the responsible teacher but also from the community. This grading underlines the good relationship between the TA's and the context: 4,69. Ten out of thirteen respondents agreed strongly and two agreed with the statements. Remaining one was indifferent.

When asked about getting along with other students the responses varied a bit more than the prior answers. According to the statement it was supposed to be easy. Five agreed strongly with this, five somewhat, two were indifferent, and one respondent somewhat disagreed. This could be alleviated with good communication and people skills, but also being just, unbiased, and fair and with certain strictness in conduct. Personal resilience grown from and with experience helps to comply the rules and regulation. The previously listed features help also to deal with the possible problematic situations and conflicts. Well founded and fair judgment and understanding on the context pave the way to successful TA task completion.

Some TA's witnessed a grown number of contact requests in various social media channels, thus giving grounds to consider perhaps a ready-planned policy for this. It is not always certain that this is a desired side-effect of working at the university as a TA. Although, the teachers are known to have received equally contact request, so it may be just a sign of the times.

The questionnaire contained also questions about how the TA's regard their own development during and after the employment. The 'academic' skills, reading, writing analytic thinking are considered developed, but also the mentioned performing, public talking, presenting are features that are seen as improved. Self-confidence, assuredness, assertiveness, giving founded feedback are also features that the TA's think as take aways in this work. Students believed that this experience enables a better way to demonstrate their knowledge base than before. The formulation of the answers, binding the details to a bigger picture, explaining the interconnections of the concepts, conversing with the 'other party', but also to compress one's answer into concise sentence, etc., the useful skillsets expected to be required later in working life as well.

The greatest challenges are listed as the challenging situations with students (usually unhappy with their performance), maintaining the fairness in assessing the students' work in all its forms, self-/time management, and punctuated load. The last one is explicable by the fact that for example the assignments are submitted usually on the last day before the deadline, thus piling the burden.

## 5. Concluding summary

From teachers' point of view, the preparation of TA responsibilities is a good starting point. Omitting the question of the necessity of the TA's. As TA's are an invaluable asset for the faculty staff. It simultaneously relieves the load off the permanent staff while opening communication channel to student

corps, important e.g., for student feedback. The preparations require similar amount work and type of work for the teachers as it does for an independent course execution. It differs in detail. The tasks or duties need to be well pre-thought. More open and two-ways the communication between the teacher and the TA in the relationship during the employment is, the more beneficial it may be. For example, on some learning platforms there are tools to facilitate various features. The teacher may be able to use the old proverb about four eyes seeing more than two. Having said that, it may be argued that many of the take-aways of this mode belong to the metaskills sought after also in the working life after studies, thus it may be argued that this is also something the students are actually well-advised to apply for.

Higher education focuses on teaching the subject matter. However, in the field of information and knowledge management, it's common for questions and their answers to not have a single correct solution. Instead, students should prioritize understanding the essence and context of the content to grasp the bigger picture, the TA's have come to realize that this is also one of the strengthened qualities they have gotten.

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