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“Kind of students… kind of staff” - Navigating roles: A thematic exploration of PhD demonstrators’ experiences, identity, and career implications.

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Abstract

We examined the experiences of 16 PhD demonstrators from Russell and non-Russell universities, exploring teaching benefits and challenges, dual student-teacher identities, and opinions on the “demonstrator” title. Through reflexive thematic analysis of interviews, four themes were found: 1) ambiguity in the demonstrator label persists despite the GTA alternative, reflecting a disconnect between title and role, 2) the unpredictability, heavy workload, and lack of freedom in the role contribute to stress and diminish enjoyment for demonstrators, 3) feelings of being unsupported due to inadequate preparation, lack of recognition, poor treatment by staff, and the burdens of casualised contracts, 4) positive aspects including the unique demonstrator-student relationship, skill development, mentorship, supportive community, and flexible scheduling that provides a break from PhD work. The study highlights the importance of recognizing the dual identity, finding a label that reflects their responsibilities, addressing stress factors, and enhancing support and recognition for individuals within these roles.

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Introduction

Universities often employ postgraduate students, such as PhD candidates, to teach and support lab classes (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Park, 2004). While exact United Kingdom (UK) statistics on PhD students' teaching contributions are unavailable, it is estimated that about 25% of undergraduate teaching is delivered by paid staff, many of whom are PhD students (University and College Union, 2018). Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTAs) typically refers to postgraduates who teach part-time while conducting research (Park, 2002), though the terminology is not consistent and varies, with some UK universities using titles like Demonstrator. In this introduction, the term GTA will be used, as it is commonly used term in the literature, except when referring to specific job titles.

GTAs hold a liminal position, balancing roles as students, teachers, researchers, and employees. This dual identity can create conflicts and hinder early professional identity development, though teaching experience helps GTAs perceive themselves as teachers over time (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Winstone & Moore, 2017). Some GTAs view their dual identity positively, allowing them to switch roles when advantageous (e.g., to empathise with students) (Winstone & Moore, 2017).

Using GTAs offers several benefits to educational institutions, as they provide flexible, low-cost labour, which is particularly valuable given rising undergraduate enrolment (Park, 2004). Their involvement frees up academic staff for research and other tasks (Muzaka, 2009; Park, 2002), and undergraduates often find GTAs approachable and relatable due to their similar age and recent experience as students (Ball et al., 2020; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2018).

For GTAs, teaching provides additional income, which supplements stipends or acts as a primary source of funding for self-supported students (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Park, 2002). It also deepens their subject knowledge, offers new research perspectives, and improves academic writing; and teaching helps GTAs develop transferable skills like communication, interpersonal skills, and time management, boosting career prospects (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Muzaka, 2009; Park, 2002). Many GTAs also enjoy teaching, finding it a welcome break from research and a confidence booster (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Park, 2002).

However, GTA work poses challenges. GTAs often report insufficient subject knowledge, time pressure due to teaching cutting into research time, and inadequate pay, especially when marking and preparation exceed paid hours (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Slack & Pownall, 2023). GTAs frequently feel a lack of agency, as they teach modules without having input into their content or organization, leading to feelings of being undervalued by departments (Muzaka, 2009; Park,

2002). Another issue is the lack of standardized training for GTAs in the UK, with variations across subjects and institutions in both quantity and type of training (Ellis, 2014; Muzaka, 2009; Rushin et al., 1997). Training recommendations differ, with some suggesting a focus on content (Kendall & Schussler, 2012), others on practical or interpersonal skills (Awais & Stollar, 2021), and still others on pedagogical techniques (Ruder & Stanford, 2018). Chadha (2013) recommends that training programs should be tailored to the student population and institutional resources.

Current Study

The overall aim of this research is to explore the experiences of PhD demonstrators, rather than posing formal research questions, the study is guided by three exploratory aims. These aims informed the design and analysis of the study, allowing for a flexible and in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. The aims are to: 1) explore the benefits and challenges of teaching as a PhD student, 2) understand how PhD demonstrators manage the dual identity of student and teacher, and 3) to assess PhD students' opinions on the title *PhD demonstrator* and its accuracy in reflecting their role. In the UK, 24 universities with a particular focus on research intensity are known collectively as the Russell Group (Russell Group, 2025); this study will recruit from Russell Group institutions and non-Russel group institutions, in order to ensure themes are relevant for those working across the sector rather than focusing specifically on one institution.

Findings highlight development, training, and support avenues that relate directly to the challenges currently experienced by PhD demonstrators. Enhancing their experience is expected to positively impact both their academic pursuits and the quality of teaching provided to undergraduate students (Procter et al., 2004). In the UK, job titles for PhD students teaching undergraduates vary widely across institutions, and while research on the GTA title exists, this study fills a gap by examining PhD students' perceptions of the demonstrator title.

Method

The study took an inductive approach, and the presented results used semantic coding to explore the experiences of PhD demonstrators, which focuses on the explicit, surface-level meaning in participants' accounts. This approach was chosen to ensure that the findings remain closely aligned with participants' own words and are translatable into practical recommendations for supporting PhD demonstrators. The analyser took a realist approach to coding, however, to maintain reflexivity, a second researcher who takes a critical realist approach was introduced to facilitate discussion of ideas and minimise any biases in the coder's perception.

Participants

Sixteen participants (12 identified as female, 4 as male), aged 24 to 39 (*Mean* = 29 years, *SD* = 4.41) took part in the research. Participants needed to be current PhD students at a UK university, and either currently be in a demonstrator role or have previously been during their PhD. Table 1 provides the demographics for each participant, their associated pseudonym, and teaching information. Recruitment occurred through adverts at two universities in England and the researcher's social media. Participants were not incentivised to take part in the study.

Procedure

Participants read the information sheet and consent form via Qualtrics (Version November 2022 – July 2023, Qualtrics, Provo, UT), informing them of the aims of the research, that data would be kept confidential, and their right to withdraw at any point before or during the interview. Participants who consented to take part provided demographic information and generated their unique code to allow for the interview and demographics to be matched (see Appendix 1). Participants were given 7-days to withdraw from the study and could do so by providing their unique code to one of the researchers. The average interview length was 32 minutes (minimum 17 minutes, maximum 53 minutes).

Analytic Procedure

A semi-structured interview was designed and split into 3 sections (see Appendix 2). The first section intended to gather information regarding the participants' general role, training received, and workload. The second section was regarding their career goals and if there was anything they would change within their current role. The third section explored the label of PhD demonstrators, the GTA label, and their overall thoughts on their teaching role.

The audio from the video interviews were transcribed using Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004). The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis using the six-phase framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To ensure the trustworthiness and quality of the data, we adopted several strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria. Credibility was enhanced through investigator triangulation, one author coded the data, and after every three interviews sense-checked and explored interpretations of the data with another researcher, with the aim of achieving a richer understanding of the interpretation meanings through discussing the analytic process (Byrne, 2022). Transferability was supported by providing contextualised descriptions of participants and university setting, enabling readers to assess the relevance of

findings across universities. Dependability was addressed through a transparent and systematic analytic process, including an audit trail of coding decisions and reflexive memos. Confirmability was strengthened through the inclusion of the COREQ checklist (Tong et al., 2007) in the supplementary materials, which outlines the study's methodological rigour and transparency.

Findings

Theme 1 - "should have a title that perhaps reflects the job that we are required to do": Unpacking the demonstrator label.

This theme outlines the participants' feelings about the term demonstrator, and how it impacts their role and identity.

Participants shared several opinions about their title, with many seeming neutral about their title, with several of them claiming to have never considered it before. For example, Hellen showed her lack of previous thought about the name, "I don't really care, but, I've never thought about it to be fair, until now." Several participants also demonstrated their general apathy towards what they are called by claiming to be "indifferent towards it" (Lana) and stating that "it doesn't matter what the name is" (Luis). Participants claimed that they were not even familiar with the term 'demonstrator' until they assumed the position themselves. Participants describe being unaware of the role despite years of experience working in the academic field, "I've actually never heard of demonstrator, and this is me, I've worked in academia for maybe 8, 9 years before I did my PhD" (Gaby). This reflects the lack of consistency in the terminology used to describe PhD student teachers, and that the label of demonstrator is not "well understood" (Gaby). Because of this confusion, some purposefully avoid mentioning the term to students, for example, Lucy claims, "I don't really say the demonstrator bit to them, because I don't think they'd understand that".

Participants felt that the title demonstrator represents their role poorly. Many expressed that the name was "meaningless" (Lucy), and "not clear what that job is" (Kim). Abby expanded by describing a lack of understanding when mentioning her title to others:

"it's weird because when I, when I talk to other people, I'm like ... I'm going to go do teaching now but it's not actually called teaching and I think, when you say demonstrating to people, they don't always know what that means. ... I don't know whether it fully encompasses what you actually do"

The title being unclear leads to inaccurate judgments being made about the demonstrators. For instance, Paul felt that the title "bigs up the role a bit more than it should" and that "when you think

demonstrator, I would think lecturer.” This is contrast to other participants such as Hellen who felt that the title understated the role and “perpetuates the idea that we [demonstrators] are less than, that we do less than other people.” This impression of feeling undervalued is echoed by Louise who reports that her title made her seem “like a helping hand,” while she taught the same material taught by staff members. The title also raised concerns about the competence of the participants,

"like sometimes people are a little bit put off initially when they hear you're just a student yourself... they sort of almost don't take into account that you're a PhD student so it's a little bit different, um, you are… qualified to teach the classes" (Sophia).

To avoid these inaccurate perceptions, participants reported that the name is seldom used in the teaching context. David states,

“I don't think students ever refer to us as demonstrators, I don't think staff really refer - I think it's more of a paper thing, or you know like when the adverts go out, you know, this is a demonstratorship."

As well as perceptions of the role, the sense of identity of participants appears to be affected by terminology. Some felt that they were “somewhere in-between full-time members of staff” (Jane) and described this “kind of students… kind of staff” status as a “weird situation” (Paul). This in-between status is felt by students as reported by Anne, "they know there's a difference between us and staff, but not necessarily what that difference is... maybe they don't understand what a PhD is. So, there's a bit of confusion there".

The nature of the role does not clarify what the distinction between staff and demonstrators is, placing demonstrators in a confusing state of identity. Participants such as Kim described difficulties with this identity as she “fit in better with the students than… with the staff.” Kim expanded on this difficulty as she described herself struggling with her newfound position of authority,

> "it's kind of hard for me to know how to carry myself in that scenario... in like real life... I would just be mates with these people. So then like having this weird like job where you're their teacher, I don't know, it's a bit of a head fuck really."

Overall, the terminology coupled with the nature of the role is shown to contribute to the uncertainty caused by the dual identity reported by some participants.

Participants discussed the term GTA as an alternative to demonstrator, while Anne found it confusing as it “blurs the boundaries even more”, others preferred it, as it “means so much more than demonstrator” (David) and “it actually explains what it does more” (Lana), as it conveyed a broader role. However, Abby raised concerns about the term “graduate”:

"I mean it's weird because obviously there are some master’s classes as well, right? And they are also graduates. ... they might view you more as like on par, whereas like you should have a little bit more experience to be able to do the, the teaching.”

The theme highlights the complexity of terminology in accurately representing the role, acknowledging that while GTA “more accurately reflects” (Paul) and may be more descriptive, it still presents challenges.

Theme 2 - Stress Factors impacting demonstrators’ role enjoyment.

This theme explores how different aspects of the role cause stress and make the role less enjoyable.

Many participants expressed that demonstrating was time-consuming and unpredictable, “It's really bizarre... things just hit the roof and it's like all hands-on deck really, really intensely stressful couple of months. And then within a, literally, within a couple of days things just nosedive back to nothing again” (John). The nature of the role can make structuring and planning PhD work difficult, as Kim reports that the role “takes time away from your PhD, and away from your social life, and away from your family life”.

Gaby mentions that giving up your free time is an expectation in the academic world, “unless you're willing to push some boundaries you've set for yourself, where it is like, ok, I'll work on the weekends, ok I'll work this evening, I don't think academia is really for you”. While some participants such as Lucy prioritise maintaining a healthy work-life balance:

> "I think it's also made me much stricter on, this is my weekend, I am not checking my e-mail and not dealing with those things… I make myself very available for students throughout the day when I am at work, and therefore I feel justified in making those boundaries."

Others report “giving up some sleep” (Luis) or “working loads of evenings and weekends” (Sophia) to meet the demands of demonstrating. Considering participants’ challenging experiences of managing the demands of their PhDs alongside teaching, some report an impact on their mental wellbeing. John describes the exhaustion he feels because of the role,

> “especially when the PhD really gets going, and, and, you're quite stressed, some days it is very hard to even if it's a subject you enjoy, to, to motivate yourself ... it's a bit of a shame as well, because it's like, sometimes you're just feeling exhausted, and… the class that you happen to have that day will not get your best”.

Additionally, some participants reported that they found “standing up in front of everyone … challenging” (Lana) and “nerve-wracking” (Louise). Presenting to a group of people was understandably uncomfortable for many participants:

> “[I don’t] like being the centre of attention, so if I stand in front of a crowd, then I'm going to panic no matter what. And then unless I'm very confident about what I'm doing it's very hard to make the stage mine, so yeah. I had to re-balance that over again” (Luis).

Participants who report such feelings are those who deliver content by themselves rather than assist the lecturer.

Aside from the heavy workload they face and the mental impact, many participants also report frustrations with the more tedious aspects of the role such as preparing their teaching materials,

“if we have to develop new lecture materials, we get given one hour's prep time. ... When you're delivering someone else's material, you get given no prep time. But actually, the prep time it takes to deliver lectures is ridiculous” (Jane).

This was echoed by other participants that the time they spend on preparing materials is not recognised. Additionally, almost all participants also expressed issues with marking, describing it as a “pain in the backside” (John) and “monotonous” (Anne). Some, like Grace, also report that a lack of confidence when marking student work causes them additional stress: “that was probably the most stressful time for me, because I just struggled with, kind of, you know, being confident in my marking”. Participants also felt that during marking season, their lives were taken over by marking as “you have to give up on pretty much everything else and pray for like other things to not happen during that week” (Luis). Overall, both preparation and marking are considered by participants to be the most time-consuming and least rewarding aspects of their role.

Finally, the stress of participants may be exacerbated by their reported lack of freedom in what they teach. Some participants such as Anne, reported issues with teaching “content we haven’t made” as “sometimes I do not necessarily agree with the things that are on the slides”. Besides having to teach things they may not agree with; the lack of freedom leads to other issues such as boredom. For example, Gaby described the lack of variety in her teaching as follows,

> “The repetitiveness of everything ... in second year you do the same modules, and, um, it's nice cause you don't have to, then, if you're working on the same thing it takes less preparation time, so it's useful in that way, um, but it does kind of, you get a little bit bored”.

The rigidness and repetitiveness of lesson plans seem to stifle demonstrators, and they feel that “there needs to be more flexibility” (Lucy). Overall, it seems that allowing them more freedom may attenuate the stress felt by some demonstrators.

Theme 3 – Demonstrators’ challenges with Support and Recognition in their role.

This theme explores challenges related with support and recognition including a lack of preparation, lack of recognition, and poor treatment by other staff members.

Many participants reported how they felt unprepared for their role and were “just thrown into it” (Jane) and that “there was no real prep… You just arrive as a PhD student and they're like, you're gonna demonstrate on this. Here’s the module content” (Kim). This lack of useful training led participants to “learning on the job” (Grace) which led participants to yearn for practical training to help them fulfil their role. However, others disagreed and described feeling supported by the university with the training they received, Sophia describes how her responsibilities were explained to her,

> “at the beginning of a new year what they would always do is like a meeting... to sort of set our expectations, tell us exactly what they expected us to do, what support they can offer us and also sort of explaining exactly where to find any information we might need... before every lab report and set of marking came in, we would get like a guidance sheet of exactly what to look for... and sometimes we would have a meeting as well to go through that ... the conveners can really make sure we're on the same page”.

The accounts illustrate the importance of structured training and support for participants, having clear outlines of responsibilities and a structured approach ensures participants feel equipped to fulfil their roles effectively while also promoting a sense of confidence.

A further challenge described was a lack of transparency regarding their role; some participants find themselves burdened with additional tasks beyond their official duties, with responsibilities that “aren’t necessarily factored into your official schedule” (Sophia). For example, Hellen recounts being unaware of various obligations, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed by hidden expectations:

> “I know that the marking they say that it is included in that, I just don't think it covers it, especially if you don't get training and you're having to spend more time on it... Additional meetings like we're required to go to general meetings we've never been paid for those, and they can be… two hours or more a month but, then it starts to add up... I think there's just a lot of hidden stuff that's not always even connected to teaching”.

This lack of transparency contributes to feelings of being undervalued and disorientated within the role. Furthermore, participants express frustration over being excluded from regular staff communication channels, leading to a sense of not:

> “being in the loop about things, a lot of the staff have like their own staff channels on like teams and things like that and communication can be quite bad between the staff and the demonstrators. So, we kind of don't get key information… improving the communication between the two would be a really big improvement” (Anne)

These experiences demonstrate the need for improved communication between staff and participants who are demonstrators to enhance clarity and efficiency in their roles.

Participants also faced additional challenges because of the precarious nature of their role with casualised contracts. For example, Paul discussed how demonstrators do not have the rights of other staff members such as “sickpay” because of their “casual contract”. The instability of participants work hours causes irregular income, “with the zero-hour contracts with how that's distributed it causes your wages to fluctuate very, very wildly. ... We've got this like 3- or 4-month period where you're just not getting a wage at all” (John). Kim expressed frustration with how demonstrators are the last to be thought of “because you're on a casual contract, you're an afterthought. And you're often treated as such all the way through”. Leading to participants often picking up “the work that ... people don't want, the work that's kind of, they get lumped with because of sickness and emergencies, that kind of thing” (Lucy). This instability, compound by being viewed as an afterthought, can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction among participants, who often end up with undesirable tasks.

Participants also reported feeling undervalued by other staff members and not being respected:

> “some members of staff still see us as erm, I guess bottom of the barrel... it's not members of staff who are kind of higher up that, I know that they value us… but some staff ... feel like they've worked harder to get where they are than what I'm having to ... and they make it quite well known” (Hellen).

This lack of respect is also discussed by Grace, who adds that some staff take advantage of demonstrators by making them do more work than is required of them:

> “I had a couple of experiences where they'd be like, oh, I'm gonna be an hour late to the next session so you might just have to start it... So, obviously I told like my peers, and they were like, you know, no, that's not okay, and it got sorted... I had a couple of occasions where lecturers would try to push more work onto me than they should do really. So, it was difficult”.

Hellen highlights a perceived hierarchy where demonstrators are seen as inferior, while Grace describes instances of exploitation, where they are asked to undertake tasks beyond their role. These accounts show the challenges demonstrators face in gaining recognition and fair treatment within academic environments.

A further challenge was perceived low pay, with participants expressing that the pay is “ridiculous” (Jane) and “terrible” (Kim). Gaby reported that they do more work than they are paid for:

> “if I took on a two-hour lecture, that's 100 pounds, which sounds great, but then if I include the prep time before that lecture, which I wouldn't get paid for cause the lecture's already like done, I just have to familiarise myself with the PowerPoints and that, it's actually like maybe 5 or 6 hours of prep the day before... so in reality that's what, ten, fifteen pounds an hour that I'm getting paid, so I don't think it really reflects what we're actually getting paid at all”.

In contrast, other participants did not feel that the pay was too low but could see how it could be problematic. For example, although John is not unhappy with the wage, he understands how it would be too low for someone who must support others, “But then again you know, I'm a single fella, living on his own doesn't have a family. I can understand why it would be a problem, say for someone who is married”. Some participants, such as Abby, are not unhappy with the pay overall, but feel that some aspects of the role are underpaid as they take more time than they are allocated pay for:

> “I think it's OK. I feel like for some things we do more work than we're paid for... in terms of the marking, it just takes more time than you're allocated, uh pay for... I know that's not just me because I speak to a lot of my colleagues… I think that's kind of for me where the main issue lies.”

Participants were sometimes expected to do an unreasonable amount of work as described by Jane, who had to give up some work because all of it was impossible for her to complete, “I had

something ridiculous like 180 things to mark at once and I don't have time for that. I physically cannot mark that much... I had to give some of it away, because I was just at capacity". Some participants describe a pressure to take on too much, which may be linked to their casualised contracts. For example, Hellen explains that she felt compelled to agree to every request, even if it had negative consequences for her, to make a good impression:

> "I don't think it's just an issue that… demonstrators face. I think it's anyone who's, who feels like they're casualised... you feel like you have to say yes to things.... And I think that can be a really negative working culture.... particularly if you're saying yes to lots and lots of stuff that could impact on your own studies... I was just saying yes to everything just because I wanted you know to, to look good".

Perhaps because of this pressure to be seen as a valuable staff member, some participants ended up doing more work than they had to. For example, Abby describes how she went above and beyond to give helpful feedback to students:

> "15 and a half hours is what should have taken. But I definitely ended up doing more like 20... Like I want to give the feedback that I, I feel like students really would appreciate and need... I try and stick to the time limit, but I always end up going over."

The pressure to prove oneself as a valuable staff member may lead participants to exceed their expected workload, this behaviour may therefore reflect a desire to fulfil perceived expectations and offer students the support they believe is necessary, at the cost of their own time and wellbeing.

Theme 4 – Embracing Enrichment, Flexibility, Community Bonds, and other positives for demonstrators.

This theme explores the numerous positive aspects of the demonstrator role, including their relationship with the students, skill development, mentorship, community, and flexibility, offering a break from PhD work.

Many participants reflected on the satisfaction they experienced supporting and educating students. For Sophia, "the most enjoyment I get out of it is the interaction with the students" which contrasts with her PhD that "could definitely be lonely at times". Abby echoed this sentiment, saying, "I really like it when I('ve) sort of built a rapport with the students and I feel like I genuinely am helping them... I think that's probably my favourite part." This interaction offers a sense of community, mitigating the isolation of PhD work.

The role improved participants confidence as when “I first started, I was like very nervous. Whereas this year, I feel a lot more like I know what I'm talking about. I can deliver presentations. ... I'd say I'm fairly confident now” (Abby). Similarly, John describes how

> “you build your confidence up as ... you're not going to be ... good demonstrator or lecturer right at the beginning, you're going to make mistakes, just like any profession or anything like that ... I think I'm a heck of a lot more confident in my abilities now”.

These accounts show how there is a gradual improvement in confidence over time, particularly with self-assurance, and highlights the learning curve inherent in the role.

Many participants discussed feeling enriched by their experience as they gained new knowledge, skills, and confidence. For example, David explains how he:

> “learnt a lot as well… I'm not at all a statistician, but I was doing a lot of demonstrating on stats modules ... was having to sort of teach myself everything from scratch again, and I think doing the demonstrating really sort of taught me a lot ... having that role ... enabled me to ... refresh on a lot of those skills that I'd sort of felt like I'd lost a little bit”.

Participants echoed the positive impact of the role in refreshing their understanding of fundamental concepts, particularly in statistics. Demonstrating also helped with “communication and managing different personalities” (Hellen), and “having to answer questions as well... having to think about things from different perspectives, so it's helped me like in my skills at explaining things” (Anne). This suggests that the role of a demonstrator not only contributes to academic growth but also crucial to develop effective communication.

While some participants did not receive any “formal training” (John), this lack of training could be substituted by mentoring by other staff. John describes the positive experiences of being mentored and how he was pushed to take on more teaching responsibility:

> “what really helped was being trained to come out of your comfort zone so, like, at the beginning of the semester, there was one particular lecturer who I was working with ... she said to me, right, ok look through the list... so on that session, I will introduce the session, but then it's up to you, to deliver the session, and er so I'm wanting you to prepare for that, I don't want you to just be a demonstrator, I want to kind of push you”.

Mentoring pushed John out of his comfort zone and helped develop his skills as a teacher, highlighting the value of hands-on guidance in professional development. Furthermore, participants enjoyed working closely with other staff members, as this allowed them to “observe

different teaching styles" (Grace). Kim recounts her experience of working alongside an academic with a contrasting teaching style, "I got to work with someone else who ... took a much more relaxed approach and I got to take a lot of things from that". The acknowledgement of the value in adopting a more relaxed approach highlights the benefit of encountering teaching methods different from one's own. Additionally, some lecturers were also reported to have "watched you [demonstrators] teach and give feedback" (Lucy) which was the participants found to be helpful and "really reassuring" (Abby). This collective experience highlights the informal but invaluable opportunities for skill development and pedagogical growth that arise from close collaboration and mentorship within the academic community.

A further enjoyable aspect of the role was that it "breaks up PhD work" (Louise), and while the "workload is pretty high with the PhD, and teaching obviously adds to that but it's also a nice distraction sometimes as well... I find it a welcome distraction from writing... it's just something different" (Sophia). Demonstrating provides a source of enjoyment and relief for PhD students, providing a valuable opportunity to temporarily shift focus away from research, offering a sense of balance, and a respite from the high workload associated with pursing a PhD. Demonstrating also provides a "community" (Grace), where demonstrators can talk about their experiences within the office space and provided "a nice environment ... sometimes it was productive, sometimes it was a bit more chatty ... but it was a nice space to work in" (Grace). The PhD community also helped demonstrators to have mentors as well as friends:

> "thing that I probably enjoyed the most was working with someone else who was further through their PhD than me because... it gave me the opportunity to develop friendships with other people who still felt like peers, but also could kind of be in a mentor role" (Kim).

This community helped participants as they had someone to speak to who dealt with similar issues as discussed by Lucy, "Well then talking to colleagues, they have exactly the same issues. So, I'm not alone… Everybody has these issues." The PhD community offered a sense of solidarity and reassurance, demonstrators like Lucy found validation and comfort in realising that their struggles were not unique.

The nature of the role also provides the benefit that demonstrators "haven't got real responsibilities" (Jane) and "you don't have the pressure of being the lead, and if they don't understand and have any questions, you can always fall back on the lecturer cause it's their responsibility" (Grace), which allows them to rely on staff for guidance and support if needed. Finally, participants appreciated the flexibility of their role as they reported that they "can take on sporadic bits of teaching" (Kim) as they can fit it around their busy schedule. Participants also

found it helpful when they had a regular session as they could plan the rest of their work around it, “because the seminars are already set in stone, and you have a particular time that you're teaching each week… It's easy to sort of fit other PhD stuff around that” (Louise). The demonstrator role offers a unique balance of responsibility and flexibility, allowing individuals to engage in teaching without the full weight of academic leadership.

Discussion

The current study found that: 1) there was ambiguity within the demonstrator label and a disconnect between title and role, with some favouring the term GTA as it better described their role. However, this was not a perfect solution as it did not fully resolve identity ambiguity, and both titles reflect a disconnect between title and role. 2) There were also stressors in the role, including time demands, mental strain and frustrations with teaching tasks, exacerbated by limited autonomy in teaching content. 3) Demonstrators felt unsupported due to inadequate preparation, lack of recognition, and poor treatment. Challenges included lack of training, unclear expectations, insufficient communication, precarious contracts, low pay, and excessive workload. 4) However, there are positives, including building a relationship with students and fulfilment in their learning, skill development, confidence building, mentorship, community, and relief from PhD work.

The findings provide new insights into the terminology used for the demonstrator role. Some participants felt that the title demonstrator does not adequately reflect their responsibilities, echoing concerns about GTA identity and role conflicts (Bale & Anderson, 2022; Winstone & Moore, 2017). It has been previously highlighted that GTAs often navigate dual roles as students and staff, facing challenges in establishing authority and boundaries. This study adds to this discourse by demonstrating how the label contributes to feelings of undervaluation and inadequacy, complicating identity formation within academia. Highlighting the need for consistent terminology that accurately reflects job roles (Park, 2004).

The findings also align with existing literature on the challenges faced by GTAs, including managing the dual workload of teaching and research, and being underpaid with unrecognized workload (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Slack & Pownall, 2023). The results demonstrate the need for greater autonomy in lesson planning, as many demonstrators find the rigidity and repetitiveness of current plans hindering. This lack of agency in teaching assignments reflects systematic issues within higher education (Jordan & howe, 2018; Park, 2002). However, the study also highlights the necessity of meeting core learning objectives to comply with guidelines from governing bodies like the BPS (British Psychological Society, 2025). While adhering to these standards is essential,

increased flexibility in teaching could reduce stress and enhance competencies such as lesson planning and curriculum design. Demonstrators could contribute creative and innovative approaches within the BPS framework, creating a more dynamic learning environment.

The findings show the need for standardized and comprehensive training programs for demonstrators. Previous research has made similar recommendations over the last two decades (e.g., Ellis, 2014; Rushin et al., 1997), however it is evident that these recommendations have not been put into practice consistently as demonstrators are still struggling with a lack of appropriate training. Young and Bippus (2008) state that many training programmes for GTAs/demonstrators focus on university policy to the detriment of pedagogical issues, which may explain the lack of a standardised programme used across different institutions in the UK. However, this focus on policy is unlikely to address the concerns around practical issues (e.g., creating and/or delivering materials, marking, etc) raised by GTAs/demonstrators, both in this study and previous research (Young & Bippus, 2008). A short but intensive training programme which addresses the broad pedagogical issues, such as the one developed and described by Young and Bippus (2008), could be supplemented with institution and department specific policy information, although this may need to be updated to take into account more recent developments in the field such as the use of Generative AI.

Additionally, the challenges of casualized contracts and financial insecurity raised by participants align with discussions on the exploitation of contingent academic labour (Chadha, 2013), emphasizing the need for fair employment practices in academia. The findings demonstrate the complex interplay of structural, institutional, and personal factors contributing to the stress and dissatisfaction experienced by demonstrators in higher education. It appears that changes to training and employment practices could help to relieve many of these challenges, improving the experience for both the GTAs/demonstrators and likely also for the undergraduate students who they teach.

The findings align with previous literature (e.g., Jordan & Howe, 2018, Muzaka, 2009) emphasising the positive impacts of the demonstrator role. Participants reported that teaching deepened their subject understanding and allowed them to apply fresh perspectives to their research. The role also enhanced academic writing skills, supporting the idea that teaching responsibilities contribute to demonstrators' development (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Park, 2002). Additionally, the demonstrator role fosters confidence among PhD students, consistent with previous research (Jordan & Howe, 2018, Muzaka, 2009; Park, 2002). This confidence builds gradually, reflecting the learning curve of the role. Moreover, mentorship and collaboration with

staff were found to be crucial for professional growth, as identified by Jordan and Howe (2018), especially in the absence of formal training, exposing them to diverse teaching styles.

A strength of this study is that it examines the role of the GTA across both Russel group and non-Russel group universities and looks at the shared experience across institutions. This complements existing literature, which often focuses on GTA experiences within specific disciplines at single institutions (Jordan & Howe, 2018). The study suggests that challenges such as lack of training and balancing research and teaching responsibilities may not be institution-specific but rather indicative of broader issues in training and time management across institutions. It is important to acknowledge that our sample consists predominantly of female demonstrators. Research indicates that women in academia often engage more in teaching and mentoring, while men tend to focus more on research (Misra et al., 2021; Morales et al., 2017). While this gender distribution aligns with previous findings, further research could explore the experiences of male GTAs and how departments can better support them in engaging with teaching and mentoring roles to gain valuable work experience, similar to their female counterparts.

Conclusion

Our findings have practical implications for higher education institutions and PhD demonstrators. For institutions there is a need to standardize job titles and roles for PhD demonstrators across institutions to mitigate ambiguity and enhance clarity and transparency, this would create a better understanding of the role among undergraduate students and academic colleagues. Institutions could also consider developing tailored support mechanisms, such as training programs and mentorship opportunities, to address specific challenges faced by demonstrators. Demonstrators should, however, actively seek out support networks within their institutions and engage in professional development opportunities to enhance their teaching skills.

The study highlights both the stressors and positive aspects of the demonstrator role, such as skill development. Moving forward, it is crucial to advocate for standardized titles, comprehensive training programs, and fair employment practices to address structural issues and improve the teaching experience for demonstrators. Creating a supportive environment and allowing for creative input within the guidelines set by governing bodies can further enhance their overall experience.

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Appendix 1: Participant information

Table 1.

Participant Demographics, Pseudonyms, and teaching experience.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	University	Did they teach during COVID?	Currently teaching?	Other paid employment	Year of Study	Years teaching in HE	Hours Teaching per week
Gaby	29	F	White	NRG	No	Yes	RA	2nd	2	8
David	34	M	White	NRG	Yes	Yes (not demonstrating)	Yes	6th	6	35
Grace	30	F	White	NRG	Yes	Yes (not demonstrating)	Lecturer	6th	6	30
Jane	24	F	White	NRG	Yes	Yes	No	3rd	2.5	10
Kim	30	F	White Jewish Heritage	NRG	Yes	No	Personal trainer, Workshop facilitator, Administrator/ personal assistant	4th	3.2	20
Lucy	37	F	White	NRG	Yes	Yes	No	Final	4	38

John	28	M	White	NRG	Yes	Yes	No	3/4th	2	12-20
Hellen	26	F	White	NRG	Yes	Yes	No	4th	3	15
Lana	26	F	White	RG	No	No	No	4th	1	1
Paul	28	M	White	RG	Yes	No	No	4th	3	4
Anne	25	F	White	RG	No	Yes	No	2nd	2	12
Louise	24	F	White	RG	Yes	Yes	RA	3rd	3	3-10
Abby	28	F	White	RG	No	Yes	Social network coordinator	2nd	1	7-15
Sarah	39	F	White	RG	No	Yes	No	1st	1	4
Luis	33	M	Asian/Latino	RG	Yes (not in UK)	Yes	Lecturer, Research assistant	1st	6	10-15
Sophia	29	F	White	RG	Yes	No	RA	3rd	3	12

Note: F= Female Identifying, M= Male identifying, HE= Higher Education, RG= Russel Group, NRG= Non-Russel Group, RA= Research Assistant. All participants stated they had obtained a qualification of a degree or higher level.

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

Section 1 – General role and workload questions – *In this section we are obtaining an insight into your workload, what you teach on, what you enjoy teaching on and dislike, and the training you have received and your thoughts on this. So let's kick it off...*

1) Can you tell me a bit about your workload as a student?

Probe: How many hours do you work on your project for roughly a week?

2) Can you tell me about your workload as a demonstrator in Psychology?

Probe: What modules are you currently involved in?

Probe: How many hours do you teach for roughly a week?

3) Are there aspects of the demonstrator role that you particularly enjoy?

Prompt: Such as supporting in labs, office drop-in hours, or marking?

Probe: Are there any aspects that you dislike?

4) Did you receive any training to help in your role as a demonstrator?

Probe: Did you feel you received sufficient training?

Probe: Would you have liked any other training?

Probe: What are your feelings about the training?

5) How confident do you feel about your teaching?

Probe: Do you think the training impacted how you teach?

Probe Has you confidence changed over time?

6) What are your thoughts about the payment you receive for the work you do.

Prompt: Do you think you are paid appropriately for the work you do?

Probe: What elements of the job do you think requires the most amount of time for what you are paid?

Probe: What elements of the job do you think requires the least amount of time for what you are paid?

7) Thinking about your current workload. Would you want to take on more teaching responsibility?

Probe: Why is this?

Probe: Tell me about the barriers preventing you from pursuing this.

8) Has the amount of teaching changed as you have progressed with the PhD?

Prompt: Has the amount increased or decreased as you have progressed with the PhD?

Probe: Do you plan to change the amount of teaching you do?

9) How do you balance your time between the PhD and demonstrator role?

Prompt: Are there any techniques you use to help you balance your time between the two roles?

Probe: Do you find that certain times of the year are easier or harder to balance between the two roles?

Section 2 – FUTURE – *In this section we are obtaining an overall idea of how your current role will impact your future aspirations, and also if there is anything that the PhD students would change within their demonstrator role.*

While a PhD allows you the opportunity to explore a research area in detail, it is also the time to prepare you for your future. What do you want to do in the future?

Prompt: Do you see yourself staying in academia or working in industry?

Probe: Do you think the teaching experience you have gained will help you in your future career?

Is there anything you would change about how PhD students teach at the University?

Prompt: Is there anything you would like more experience on?

Probe: Do you think you get enough experience?

Probe: Do you think this experience prepares you for your future career?

Section 3 – General Definition– *In this section we are asking your opinions on the name of a GTA, and your overall thoughts on the role.*

At this institution we refer to you as PhD Demonstrators. What are your thoughts on this title?

Prompt: Do you think the title used reflects what you do in your role?

Probe: Do you think another title would be better?

Before you became a PhD demonstrator, were you familiar with this term?

Probe: Do you think the title effects how students view you?

*Probe: D*o you think students understanding of the name effects their view on you?

Other Universities use the term Graduate teaching assistant (GTAs), what are your thoughts on this definition?

Probe: How do you think it compares to your title as PhD demonstrator?

Probe: What would you prefer to be called?

Section 4 - Final Closing Questions

Finally, in relation to the interview itself, **how have you found it?**

Have you talked about what you expected to be talking about?

Do you have any questions?

I would like to take this final opportunity to thank you for taking part in the study.