

Teaching Assistants (TAs) as secondary facilitators in an academic support unit in a South African university



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Introduction and Background

- Teaching assistantships are common funding sources for postgraduate students in higher education
- At Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) this practice aims at creating an enabling, effective and supportive learning environment which meaningfully contribute to the overall quality of learning
- Specific duties of teaching assistants (TA) vary by course, discipline, and institution
- This paper seeks investigate the nature of the TAs experiences as secondary facilitators in an academic support unit.



Introduction and Background (Cont.)

- By engaging TAs the institution seeks to improve success and throughput rates across disciplines
- Overarching aim is to create an enabling environment for students; empower them to make a smooth transition from high school to university
- Lecturers become primary mentors and guidance counsellors essentially driven by a teaching and learning philosophy
- A variety of duties is performed by the TAs
- Of note, there has been limited research in terms of the lived experiences of teaching assistants in the higher education sector in South Africa.



What is a Teaching Assistant (TA)?

- Teaching assistants fall under the category of peer facilitators, student mentors, writing consultants and Supplementary Instruction (SI) leaders
- In this context, teaching assistants or tutors provide an academic literacy and complete language service to students
- Additionally, other duties involve assisting students in the reading and language laboratories and admin work
- They need to be well trained in order to assist students “at risk” of dropping out of the system
- Institutions can better prepare TA’s for their teaching responsibilities, to maximize their success both in the classroom and in their future careers and to increase their confidence and skills in dealing with challenges as they arise (Amlung, L. et.al:2015).



Academic Literacy development

- Teaching assistants' roles have changed dramatically from the historical classroom assistants to developing professionals and future academics (Visser et. al , 2017; Amlung et.al, 2015; Cassidy, et.al, 2014)
- Attempts have been made to strengthen capacity of teaching assistants in the academic support unit in the direction of developmental workshops
- Developing teaching assistants in reading and writing development practices becomes an integral part of student development in a variety of genres in higher education
- To draw on work done by researchers in academic literacy, McKenna (2004), Van Dyk, et. al (2013), Evans and Morrison (2011) contend that academic literacy comprises the norms and values of higher education as manifested in discipline-specific practices
- The development of the academic literacies is an essential graduate attribute for all students (Paxton and Frith: 2006).



Key research questions

- What are the experiences of teaching assistants in an academic support environment in a university of technology (UoT)?
- To what extent do teaching assistants contribute to the success and throughput rates of students in the area of academic support during their tenure as senior students at the university?
- To what extent does the secondary facilitation of learning offered by TAs contribute to the success and throughput rates of students?



Theoretical Framework

- Underpinned by the constructivist approach the TAs construct their conceptual and content knowledge understanding through guidance and training from experienced lecturers and faculty members of staff
- This approach was used to frame and analyse this work
- Constructivism and connectivism to construct meaning whereby students in the constructivist classroom ideally become "expert learners"(Bruner:1990)



Enhancing TA's potential through Teaching, training and development

- It is imperative for faculty to develop students to become the next generation of faculty, especially those who excel academically
- Boyer (1990) contends that faculty at institutions that value research more than teaching may be ineffective teaching mentors for graduate TAs
- The scope of teaching assistants is wide as Next Generation of faculty for future education
- The value that is placed on mission statements of universities cannot be overlooked whilst developing teaching assistants.



Methodology

- Semi structured interviews were conducted; the initial plan was to engage six (6) participants
- Purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998; Cohen, et.al 2007) was used in data collection, targeted a total of six; divided as follows: three present and three past TAs formed part of the study
- All potential interviewees were consulted, however, only five (5) participants were finally interviewed
- The rationale for selecting the previous teaching assistants was to assess and evaluate the unit practices, overtime.

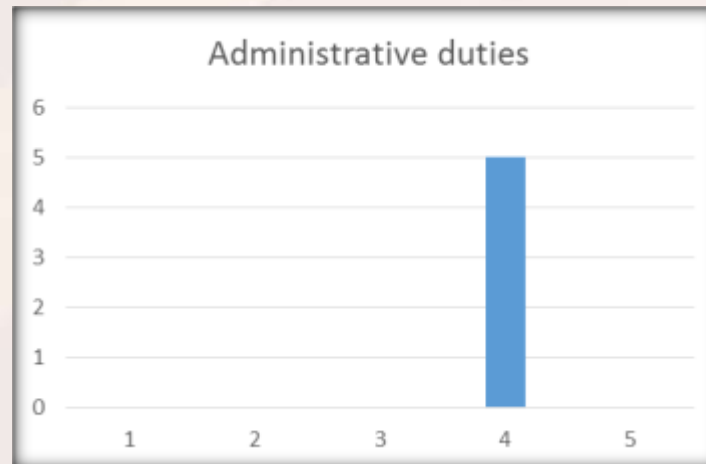
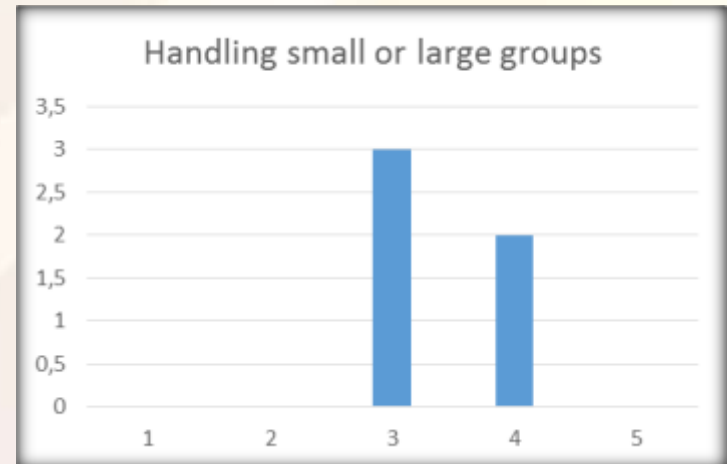


Data Analysis

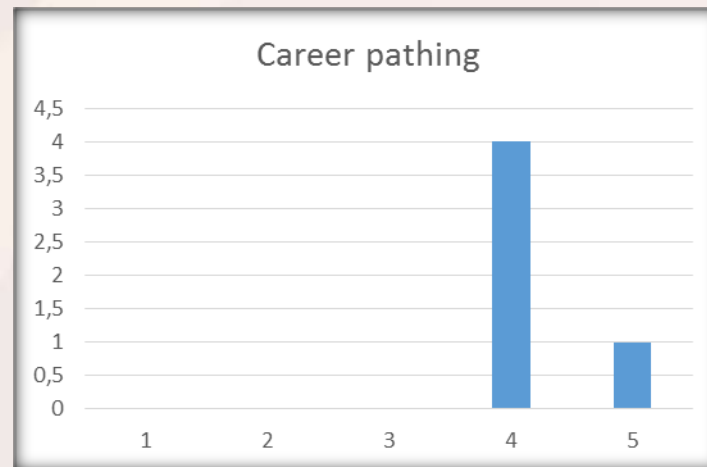
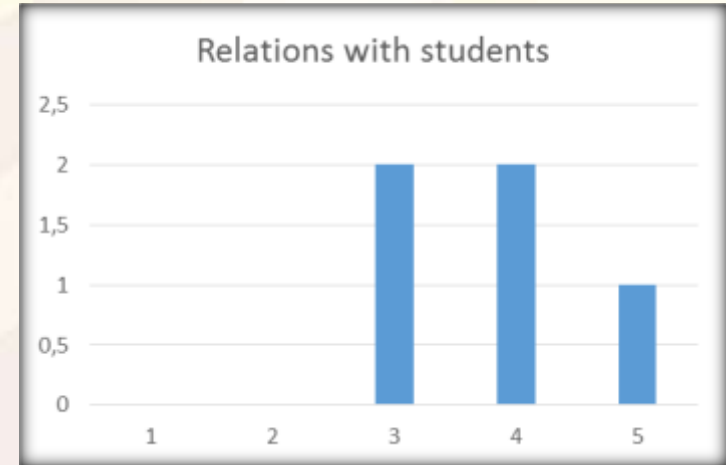
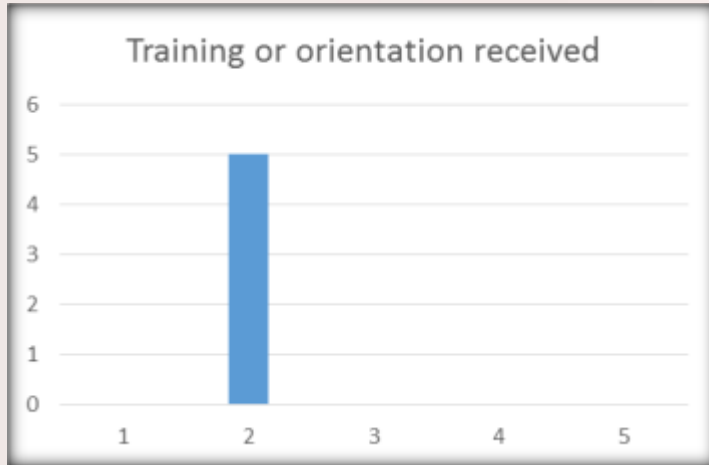
- The interview responses of participants were measured on a five-point Likert scale: (where 1 = never/ disagree/not satisfied and 5 = always/ agree/ fully satisfied)
- Out of eleven (11) items only six (6) were extracted
- To better inform planning and operating procedures with the end goal of transforming teaching and learning spaces for students.



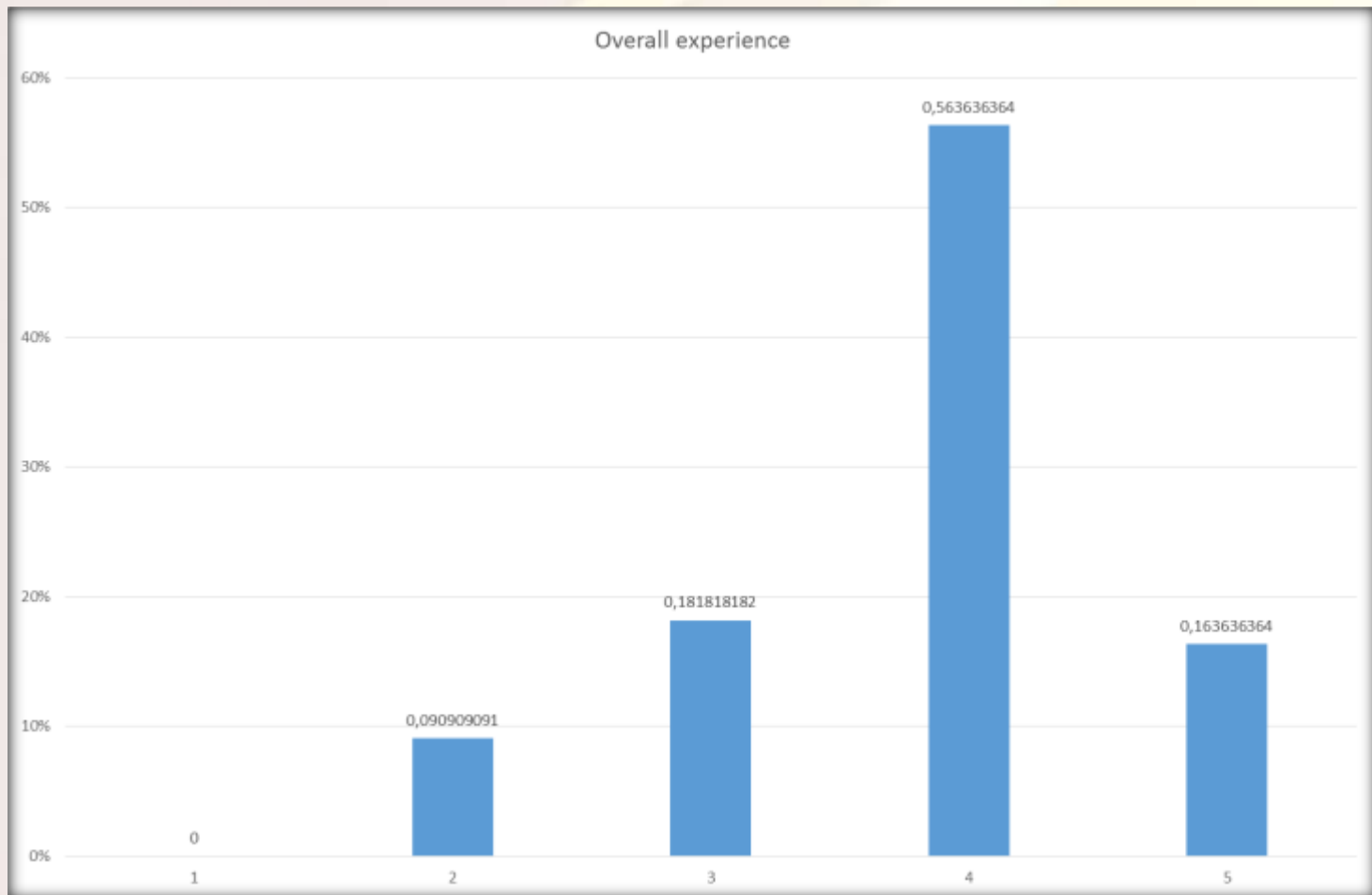
Item analysis



Item analysis (Cont.)



Summary of results



Findings

- Most TAs' exposure to academic literacy and academic support happens for the first time, that is, once they join the unit
- Continuous and further training was recommended by most interviewees (as most scored low on this one)
- Self-development in the academia was a priority
- TAs learnt from each other on how to handle and manage classes
- It is noted that formal training sessions are not in place prior to taking their duties and responsibilities
- Unit staff was commended for playing a significant role in their academic life in the area of criticality in academic literacy.



Conclusion

- Training or orientation received was minimal for most participants and needs to be improved in the future
- TAs are not adequately prepared before taking the opportunity to serve, however, it is assumed that they have graduated and are now “competent” to serve faculty
- Two of the past teaching assistants are currently in lecturing positions and rightfully have become academics in their own right, in different disciplines of study
- By giving space and opportunity to TAs universities may contribute immensely in enhancing potential and graduate attributes of future employees/employers.



THANK YOU!
NGIYABONGA!
GRAZIE!



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