

Stakeholder summary

Long-term training programs for teaching assistants have greater impact

Training programs for university teaching assistants (TAs) improve the quality of teaching and learning. But a new HEQCO study of short and long-term training programs at two Ontario universities finds that while both make important contributions, long programs had a greater impact.

Assessing Graduate Teaching Development Programs for Impact on Future Faculty was conducted at the University of Windsor and Western University, whose teaching and learning centres offer a wide range of TA training programs -- short, orientation-style conferences and longer, intensive workshops throughout the year.

Project description

The study used self-reported measures of TAs' attitudes to teaching and teaching self-efficacy before and after each program, combined with focus group interviews four months after program completion. The goal was to assess and compare the impact of the programs and to link specific types of programming to measurable outcomes.

Findings

Teaching development programs help improve the teaching effectiveness of new TAs in a variety of ways, according to the study. TAs felt better prepared for their role as instructors after participating in training. Both short (one-day events) and long programs (20-40 hours) contributed to increased teaching self-efficacy and to an increase in student-focused approaches to teaching. The focus groups found that when TAs began to teach on their own, they were able to apply the teaching techniques, course design principles and student-focused approaches to teaching that they learn in TA training programs.

Participants in short programs emphasized concrete teaching techniques for facilitating discussions, marking, asking effective questions and becoming more familiar with expectations for the teaching assistant role. Participants in longer programs demonstrated greater confidence in using principles of course design and alignment and articulating learning outcomes, and showed a greater depth of reflection on teaching.

Long programs also created communities of TAs from a variety of disciplines, where discussion about teaching continued beyond the end of the program. Participants also shared innovative teaching techniques or course design strategies with their peers and with faculty members.

The study found that both programs make an important contribution – but do so in different ways. Short programs serve as a gateway to further teaching development, allowing new graduate students to learn a few very practical teaching strategies and better understand the benefits of further training. Longer programs allow participants to build community and strategically prepare for careers in teaching, whether inside or outside academia.

The authors note that it is important for teaching centres and departments to clearly communicate the differences between the outcomes of orientation-style and more in-depth programs.

Further research

Addition research could explore long-term changes in TAs' approaches to teaching after training, as well as the impact of TA training on student learning, say the authors, complementing the self-report measures used in this study with observer and student ratings of TA teaching in real classroom settings.

Other HEQCO studies that explore teaching and TA development include a [report](#) on two University of Toronto TA training programs, a [study](#) of Western University's international TA training programs and an [overview](#) of the evolution of teaching and learning centres in Ontario colleges and universities.

Authors of *Assessing Graduate Teaching Development Programs for Impact on Future Faculty* are Nanda Dimitrov, Ken Meadows, Erika Kustra, Theimann Ackerson, Laura Prada, Nick Baker, Pierre Boulos, Gayle McIntyre and Michael K. Potter.