

Stakeholder summary

Program helps international graduate teaching assistants manage pedagogical culture clash

Graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) are a staple of university education in Canada. Plentiful among them – particularly in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) disciplines – are international students from other countries and cultures where higher education is primarily teacher-centered and where students treat professors with deference and respect. Coming to Canadian universities as both graduate students and teaching assistants, they encounter a very different environment that is more learner-centered and where students feel free to interrupt and challenge their instructors on everything from course content to grades.

Helping international TAs manage this pedagogical culture clash is the focus of a new study commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). *Bridging the Gap: The Impact of the 'Teaching in the Canadian Classroom' Program on the Teaching Effectiveness of International Teaching Assistants* looked at TA training programs at Western University and found that a program enhanced with significant intercultural components has a positive impact on the development of international graduate students – not only as teachers, but also as graduate students.

Project description

The study examined two TA training programs – one with substantial intercultural content and designed expressly for international TAs, the other a general program with limited intercultural content – to determine their impact on the transition of international graduate students to Canadian higher education. Both programs include “microteaching sessions” where TAs receive detailed feedback on a ten-minute lesson that they teach and modules on effective teaching techniques. The intercultural program also addresses such issues as cultural differences in the role of instructors and students, expectations for student engagement and strategies to help international students bridge cultural differences in communication styles with their students and supervisors.

Students from a variety of disciplines who enrolled in both programs between January 2011 and January 2012 participated in the study. At the beginning and end of each program, participants completed a series of self-report questionnaires and some also participated in follow-up focus groups. Canadian TAs participating in the general program were included in the research as a comparison group.

Findings

The international TAs who participated in the intercultural program made greater gains in their overall teaching effectiveness in the microteaching session, although other analyses found no significant differences between the three groups. However, the focus group interviews, which took place four to seven months after the programs, revealed considerable differences between the two training programs in terms of long-term impact. Participants in the intercultural program evidenced a shift towards more

student-centered approaches to teaching and an increased ability to achieve active learning in their classrooms.

As the authors note, these students “saw themselves as facilitators of learning rather than transmitters of information.” Several TAs also said they noticed both effective and ineffective teaching techniques by their professors more keenly.

Given that differences between the two program outcomes were more evident in the focus group discussions conducted several months later, the authors suggest that the impact on effective teaching is long-term and may emerge several months after program completion. The authors also note that participants in the intercultural program were, on average, somewhat older and had more prior teaching experience, whereas participants in the general program were mostly novice teachers.

Further research/policy implications

The report encourages colleagues at other institutions to consider replicating the research with their own related programs, and notes that future research should examine such programs for long-term changes in teacher behaviours.

Universities should invest in enhanced intercultural training for their international TAs, according to the report. “Given the large number of international graduate students who are teaching in our undergraduate programs, we feel it is essential that these students receive training in teaching, both for the students they will teach, and for their own academic success...The competencies that [these students] develop in the program are necessary in a global society – competencies that would also be a valuable skill for Canadian graduate students,” the authors say. “If resources allow, universities may consider developing a graduate student development program enhanced with intercultural communication components for all of their teaching assistants.”

Authors of Bridging the Gap: The Impact of the ‘Teaching in the Canadian Classroom’ Program on the Teaching Effectiveness of International Teaching Assistants are Debra L. Dawson, Nanda Dimitrov, Ken N. Meadows and Karyn Olsen, Western University.