

# **Engaging Graduate Students in Educational Development work: What do we know from the Canadian Context?**

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Engaging with students as partners has been a valuable focus in higher education teaching and learning practice and scholarship for the past decade (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Research to date has explored the benefits, challenges, and best practices of partnering with students in many areas of HE including course design, the development of classroom assessments, discipline-based educational research (DBER), and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Another area of higher education teaching and learning in which students are becoming increasingly engaged as partners is educational development, most often through the activities of teaching and learning centers (TLCs). For the purpose of this report, we are focusing on educational development (ED) activities where students are engaged as designers or co-designers, facilitators or co-facilitators as opposed to activities in which students are engaged as participants. While the engagement of graduate students in ED activities has been recognized as one of the pathways to introduce people to a career in educational development (McDonald, 2011), there is little research documenting current practices let alone exploring the benefits and challenges of such engagement.

In order to find out more about current practice, we conducted an environmental scan of TLCs in Canadian higher education institutions. The objective was to get a high-level understanding of the programs and engagement practices that TLCs in Canadian higher education institutions employ to recruit, prepare, and involve graduate students in educational development work. In the same way that there are a wide variety of educational development roles, there are many ways graduate students are engaged in ED activities. Different organizational contexts, priorities, and needs contribute to the multiplicity of practices through which TLCs recruit and engage graduate students as educational developers.

This preliminary data was generated by reviewing websites of TLCs in Canadian institutions listed by the [Educational Developers Caucus \(EDC\)](#). The websites were explored in two stages during May 2020 and July 2020. During the first stage, the websites were scanned to identify TLCs that posted any information about employing graduate students in educational development activities. If the center has not provided details of engaging graduate students as educational developers on its website, we excluded it from the second stage of our process. A total of 10\* institutions were identified for further exploration. In the second stage, the websites of teaching and learning centers for these 10 institutions were explored in detail to collect information on the following questions.

- How are graduate students recruited in educational development roles?
- Are these roles paid or voluntary?
- Who provides the supervision, training, or mentorship for these roles?
- What is the nature of graduate students' engagement in educational development work?
- What are the key responsibilities that graduate students are expected to perform as educational developers?

While we were unable to find answers to all of the questions from all of the institutions, the data obtained during the second stage show that there exists a great deal of diversity in ways TLCs in Canadian institutions employ graduate students in educational development work. Based on our questions in stage 2, we have divided our description of findings into the following two sections: the recruitment of graduate students, and programs and responsibilities.

### **Recruitment of Graduate Students**

Our initial scan shows that TLCs in Canadian institutions recruit graduate students through a variety of different mechanisms for educational development work. Most of these recruitments are paid jobs where graduate students are employed part-time for a commitment ranging between 10-20 hours per week. However, we also observed a couple of voluntary programs where senior graduate teaching

assistants were engaged as mentors and peer-reviewers to support and help other graduate teaching assistants. As shown in Table 1, six TLCs employed graduate students in paid positions while two TLCs recruited graduate students as volunteers. For the remaining two institutions, we did not find any information on their websites about whether graduate student activities are paid or voluntary.

**Table 1**

*Recruitment in Educational Development Roles*

<b>Type of Recruitment</b>	<b>N</b>
Paid positions	6
Volunteer positions	2
Not identified	2

Our review of the job listings, where available on TLC websites, shows a wide range of desirable attributes and qualifications that TLCs seek in candidates interested in educational development positions. We found that the most common requirement was for graduate students who have proven interest in university teaching and have been teaching assistants for more than a year (n=7). The amount of necessary TA experience, however, varied among institutions. As shown in Table 2, two institutions required more than two years of TA or equivalent experience of teaching, and one institution required more than one year. Interestingly, four institutions listed TA experience as a requirement, but they did not specify the required number of years.

Similarly, six institutions required that graduate candidates have prior experience of participating in the teaching development activities and programs. Also, we noted that five institutions stated that eligible graduate students for educational development positions must be registered full-time in Masters or Doctoral programs.

**Table 2***Qualification Requirements for Educational Development Roles*

<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>N</b>
	7
Teaching (TA) Experience	<2 Years = 2 <1 Year = 1 Years NOT identified = 4
Participation in Instructional Development	6
Full-time graduate students	5

**Programs and Responsibilities**

As discussed earlier, TLCs in Canadian higher education institutions employ graduate students in a variety of educational development activities. Our scan of TLC websites indicates that these practices may be divided into two broad categories. First, apprenticeship programs involve graduate students shadowing and assisting the professional staff members in performing a range of educational development activities and responsibilities. These programs seem designed to offer a structured and well-planned pathway for graduate students to prepare for educational development careers in TLCs. As shown in Table 3, three institutions offered apprenticeship programs to graduate students. While these programs differed from each other in their size and scope, they had an overlapping goal of providing hands on training and experience to graduate students in the field and practice of educational development.

**Table 3***Nature of Educational Development Roles*

<b>Programs</b>	<b>Position Types</b>	<b>N</b>
Apprenticeship Programs	Educational Development	3
	Associates/Assistants	
Programs with Specific Educational Development Responsibilities	Teaching Development Mentors and Facilitators for TAs	6
	Graduate Teaching Assistants for T&L Courses	
	Learning Technology Coaches	1

In contrast to the apprenticeship model, we observed programs where graduate students were employed to perform and assist with more specific educational development roles. Table 3 identifies three of these specific educational development activities. First, we found six programs where institutions employed senior TAs with university teaching experience to assist with the teaching development activities for fellow TAs. Second, we identified two programs where graduate students were hired as TAs for the teaching and learning courses offered at TLCs for university instructors. Third, we observed a program where graduate students from various disciplines were employed as “learning technology coaches” to assist faculty and other instructional staff with their technology-related queries and issues. Here, graduate students were also responsible for planning and facilitating workshops on various learning technologies.

### **Conclusion**

Our preliminary scan of TLC websites has proven to be a good starting point for understanding the landscape of graduate student employment in educational development activities in TLCs across

Canada. We have been able to identify some of the approaches and criteria TLCs have in place for employing graduate students in educational development activities. We have also noted a range of practices and programs that TLCs utilize to encourage the participation of graduate students in educational development work.

We are aware of the limitation of relying solely on the exploration of the websites for an environmental scan and acknowledge that a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the landscape of graduate student engagement in educational development activities is needed. For this purpose, in our second phase, we look forward to a follow up survey to learn more about Canadian TLC practices for involving graduate students in educational development activities. We also look forward to exploring how graduate students who are employed for educational work are assessed or evaluated for their work, and how these assessment and evaluation practices differ depending on the paid or voluntary positions. Finally, we are interested in learning the best practices TLCs employ for mentoring and guiding graduate students into the field and practice of educational development.

## References

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## Appendix A\*

The TLC websites for the following ten institutions were reviewed in phase two of our environmental scan process. Institutions are listed in alphabetical order.

Carleton University, <https://carleton.ca/edc/>

McMaster University, <https://mi.mcmaster.ca/>

Queen's University, <https://www.queensu.ca/ctl/>

University of British Columbia (Vancouver), <https://ctl.ubc.ca/>

University of Calgary, <https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/>

University of Saskatchewan, <https://teaching.usask.ca/index.php>

University of Toronto, <https://teaching.utoronto.ca/>

University of Waterloo, <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/>

Wilfrid Laurier University, <https://students.wlu.ca/work-leadership-and-volunteering/student-teaching-development/index.html>

York University, <https://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/>