Report of the Sub-Committee on the
Training of Teaching Assistants at
Queen's University
to the
Senate Committee on Academic Development
April 2002

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Executive Summary

The Senate Committee on Academic Development established the Sub-Committee on the Training of Teaching Assistants at Queen's University in June 2001. The underlying principles and goals articulated by SCAD in establishing the sub-committee were the enrichment of the professional development of Teaching Assistants and the enhancement of the apprenticeship aspect of their experience as they develop skills for their future endeavours, as well as the improved delivery of the academic program to undergraduate students. The Sub-Committee was given the specific tasks of undertaking a review of existing Teaching Assistant (TA) training policies and practices at this university as well as other comparable institutions; developing strategies on how to improve the training of teaching assistants across the university; and finally, providing recommendations and advice to SCAD concerning the establishment of university-wide training and assessment of teaching assistants. Following is a summary of the Sub-Committee's recommendations:

Recommendation 1

That Departments and/or Faculties review their current TA training practices with the goal of creating comprehensive approaches to TA development (including workshops for beginning TAs, support for more experienced TAs and self-directed programs for TAs who want to improve their teaching). That Departments and/or Faculties also review the way they select, mentor, and assess their TAs, formally define their roles and responsibilities and facilitate the resolution of disputes. That Departments and/or Faculties, whenever possible, consider innovative ways to integrate TAs into the discipline-specific teaching and learning environment.

Recommendation 2

That Departments designate an individual who has a special interest in TA training and development and who will be responsible for (a) assessing existing TA practices, and (b) providing a brief annual report to the Department Head (with copies to the respective Faculty Dean, the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, and the IDC).

Recommendation 3

That the IDC develop a report form and distribute it to Departments and/or Faculties on an annual basis together with additional information about programs, workshops and other training opportunities provided by the IDC. That the IDC keep an inventory of the TA training efforts reported by each academic unit and advise the Vice-Principal (Academic) on TA training activities.

Recommendation 4

That consideration be given to having Internal Academic Reviews contain a section on TA training and development and faculty members be encouraged to include their TA training and development activities in their annual reports.

Recommendation 5

That all TAs receive contracts specifying their duties and training requirements, and that all new TAs participate in a mandatory training session of at least three (3) hours before taking up their assigned duties and that Departments and/or Faculties organize these sessions with assistance from the IDC.

Recommendation 6

That Queen's implement an optional university-wide Program in University Teaching and Learning, with a Certificate of Completion provided to successful participants by the IDC.

Recommendation 7

That a mandatory diagnostic assessment of ESL oral proficiency be developed. That all new graduate students who were required to obtain satisfactory results in an English language proficiency test for admission, also be required to undertake this supplementary assessment before they begin their work as TAs.

Recommendation 8

That a new term-length course entitled English Language Communication Skills for Teaching Purposes be developed and offered in the fall term. That this course be mandatory for all graduate students who were required to obtain satisfactory results in an English language proficiency test for admission and who have failed the diagnostic test of ESL oral proficiency.

Recommendation 9

That a TA Development Coordinator, associated with the IDC, be hired with the mandate to support departmental training programs, to act as a resource person on TA development for the Queen's community and to coordinate the campus-wide Program in University Teaching and Learning.

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I   Introduction

Rationale

Queen's University is committed to maintaining the quality of the teaching and learning environment and promoting excellence in the entire educational experience for its students and faculty. Moreover, the important role played by Teaching Assistants in achieving these goals is acknowledged.

The Senate Committee on Academic Development (SCAD) has, as part of its mandate, the responsibility of recommending to the Senate principles, policies and priorities for the overall academic development of the University. As a standing committee of Senate, it also has the ability to establish sub-committees for special issues or purposes that may be ongoing. Recognizing the importance of the role of Teaching Assistants within the institution and cognizant of the need for effective training of Teaching Assistants as part of their academic and professional development, SCAD established the Sub-Committee on the Training of Teaching Assistants at Queen's University (hereinafter "the sub-committee") in June 2001. Also motivating SCAD to take action on this matter were the results of Exit Poll surveys which indicate a somewhat troubling level of dissatisfaction with Teaching Assistants among the undergraduate student population.

In summary, the underlying principles and goals articulated by SCAD in establishing the sub-committee were the enrichment of the professional development of Teaching Assistants and the enhancement of the apprenticeship aspect of their experience as they develop skills for their future endeavours, as well as the improved delivery of the academic program to undergraduate students.

Mandate of the Committee

The Sub-Committee was given the specific tasks of undertaking a review of existing Teaching Assistant (TA) training policies and practices at this university as well as other comparable institutions; developing strategies on how to improve the training of teaching assistants across the university; and finally, providing recommendations and advice to SCAD concerning the establishment of university-wide training and assessment of teaching assistants. Taking into account the rationale for the focus of the work of the sub-committee, all appropriate stakeholders were represented in the composition of the sub-committee.   The complete terms of reference and membership of the sub-committee are set out in *Appendix "A"* to this report.

Previous Reports

Teaching Assistants at Queen's University have been the subject of various studies and reports over the past few years. The Sub-Committee reviewed these reports and the recommendations therein as part of its background research. Although earlier reports did not necessarily focus specifically on the training of TAs, some of the recommendations that arose from the work of the earlier committees were relevant to the mandate of this sub-committee. In particular, the sub-committee took notice of a comprehensive report prepared for the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research in April 1993; a report for the Academic Affairs Commission of the Alma Mater Society that was prepared in

March 2000 and the Report of a Conference entitled "TAs at Queen's: Realizing their Potential, Improving Teaching and Learning" which was held in January 2000. These reports are appended hereto as *Appendices "B", "C", and "D"* respectively. Furthermore, "Survey of Documents on TA Issues", which is essentially a bibliography of some of the materials that were available to the sub-committee, appears in *Appendix "E"*.

There is no doubt that the importance of TA training is a theme that runs through a number of these documents, and the sub-committee noted that some earlier recommendations have been acted upon with varying results. The 1993 report referred to above contains a section on Training and Evaluation which includes a number of specific recommendations, many of which acknowledge the importance of the role of the Instructional Development Centre (IDC) in contributing to the improvement of undergraduate teaching through the support of initiatives relating to training and evaluation. This section of the report further emphasizes the significant role that must be played by individual departments in ensuring that effective training of TAs occurs consistently. The sub-committee was encouraged to note that some of the recommendations have since become part of the accepted practice and culture of the IDC as well as some departments at the university. In another section of the report, the issue of the importance of teaching assistants being provided with opportunities to develop competency and expertise in teaching is highlighted. The necessity of being fluent in the language of instruction is also addressed.

The investigative report undertaken by the AMS in 2000 comprises a survey of departments, innovative approaches and features employed by some units and recommendations for improvement where applicable. The report addressed issues related to the following five areas: Marking, Selections and Training, Communication, Obstacles to Obtaining the Highest Quality TAs and New and Innovative Use and Recognition of TAs around the University. Specific recommendations dealing with the issues of whether or not training should be mandatory and the assessment of language proficiency were made.

Despite the successes of some individual departments, the initiatives undertaken by the IDC along with their active encouragement of a collaborative approach to the training of TAs, and the recommendations of previous committees, the sub-committee was well aware that there currently exist no university-wide training programs or standards for TAs. Taking full account of what has gone before, the sub-committee has made every effort to build on the work of previous committees and move forward with pragmatic suggestions and accompanying outlines of the resources required to carry out its proposals in order to be responsive to its mandate from SCAD.

II   Teaching Assistants at Queen's

<u>Role(s) of TAs</u>

A teaching assistant is any student paid to deliver teaching support services for a course or program of study at Queen's, regardless of job title. Teaching assistantships provide teaching support for undergraduate courses, they are a basic component of financial support for many graduate students and an important form of professional development for them, especially in terms of preparing future faculty for their teaching responsibilities.

Teaching assistants at Queen's play a significant role in undergraduate programs, supporting student learning in a variety of ways. While TAs play different roles in different faculties and departments, typically they lead tutorials or labs, mark exams and assignments and hold office hours. In some cases they also write and present lectures, monitor course websites or listservs and supervise group projects.

A teaching fellow is a graduate student who takes the major responsibility for planning, teaching and evaluation in an undergraduate or graduate course. Graduate students who take major responsibility for a course should have training (e.g., SGS-901) and demonstrated competence (e.g., teaching dossier) in university teaching. Professional TAs are individuals who deliver teaching support services for Queen's courses, who are not simultaneously registered as students at Queen's. Professional TAs are used in a small number of departments, especially in the professional schools or to supervise student TAs in departments with a large number of TAs. Professional TAs should also have demonstrated relevant instructional competence. The primary focus of this report is on student teaching assistants, rather than teaching fellows or professional TAs.

Although the vast majority of teaching assistants at Queen's are graduate students, there is a growing trend to employ undergraduate students as TAs, especially for first year courses and/or in departments without graduate programs. In APSC 100, for example, undergraduate Applied Science students are hired and trained to serve as project managers for first year design projects. Undergraduate students also work as TAs in other departments and faculties.

Many TAs at Queen's are international students. International students who are non-native English speakers may require English language training prior to taking on their TA responsibilities, depending upon the nature of their assignment.

III   TA Training at Queen's – Current State

Existing Training Opportunities

There are currently many initiatives on campus that actively promote TA training and development. Every year the IDC receives funding from the School of Graduate Studies and Research to hire a Teaching Assistant Associate (TAA) who works specifically on TA development. The TA Associate offers a series of workshops as well as one-on-one consultations to TAs on teaching and learning matters. The TAA also keeps abreast of TA needs at Queen's and develops projects to address them. In addition, the IDC offers a cross-disciplinary course on teaching and learning in higher education (SGS-901) to PhD students, provides extensive resources for TAs on the Centre website, and annually updates and releases its Handbook for Teaching Assistants.

TA development and training is primarily a departmental responsibility at Queen's. Many departments support the development of their TAs through initiatives such as annual orientation and training sessions (see Report on Departmental TA Orientation, October 2001 attached hereto as *Appendix "F"*), ongoing seminars on teaching, and courses on how to support learning in their respective disciplines. The IDC supports departmental initiatives through publication of a TA Training Manual and an annual workshop for faculty who are responsible for TA training and development in their departments.

International students requiring assistance with their English language pronunciation and communication skills can pay to register in the School of English pronunciation course for graduate students (some are partially or fully subsidized by their departments), or can hire a private tutor. There are no free courses or professional services for international TAs who are non-native speakers of English. The International Centre organizes free ESL discussion groups. The School of English pronunciation course and the International Centre ESL discussion groups address broad English language skills only. They are not designed to provide international TAs with the specific language skills needed in order to communicate in a way that supports student learning. The IDC and the International Centre collaborate every fall and winter term to offer a workshop to incoming ITAs.

The hour-long workshop introduces international TAs to Canadian academic culture and offers communication strategies for the classroom.

In summary, although there are many training opportunities for TAs at Queen's, there is currently tremendous variation in the teaching development experiences of individual TAs. Many TAs receive absolutely no preparation and minimal support for their duties, others participate in specialized TA training workshops offered by their departments and/or the IDC, while some enrol in SGS-901 or other discipline-specific credit courses which are designed to prepare them for a future life as a university professor as well as their immediate TA duties.

Comparison with Other Universities

Queen's has specialized in an approach whereby the IDC collaborates with departments and faculties in providing discipline-specific TA training programs, a model quite different from the centralized generic approach used at most other universities.

The vast majority of Canadian and U.S. universities provide some kind of orientation training program for new teaching assistants. Formats vary widely, ranging from a 2-hour workshop, to a 2- or 3-day orientation program, to a series of seminars offered over a full term or academic year. About 15 Canadian universities currently offer credit courses on university teaching for graduate students (comparable to SGS-901). About half as many Canadian universities currently offer a certificate program in higher education, also for graduate students, to encourage ongoing development in their teaching roles.

In terms of specialized training for international TAs, currently at least 4 Canadian universities offer comprehensive training programs for International TAs. The University of Guelph and Simon Fraser University offer free semester-long courses. The University of British Columbia provides a professional development program that initiates international TAs to Canadian academic culture and helps them develop communication skills. The University of Western Ontario offers basic and advanced training programs in language and teaching skills as well as Canadian academic culture. There are also approximately a dozen similar training initiatives for ITAs at U.S. universities

IV   TA Training at Queen's — Proposals

A. What Constitutes Effective TA Training?

The following remarks summarize the principles underlying the Committee's views on how we can build on existing opportunities and improve the TA training environment at Queen's.

Purpose of TA Training

Training and development programs must address the ever-present need for well-trained instructional staff in undergraduate programs. They also must take into consideration the needs of the students who serve as TAs, such as the educational requirements of undergraduate student TAs and the long-term demands placed on many graduate TAs who have to prepare for their future roles as instructors in higher education. Furthermore, training and development programs must meet the unique needs of international student TAs. Therefore, the kind of work assigned to TAs should reflect the learning needs of the students serving as TAs as well as the instructional staffing requirements of academic programs.

<u>Components of TA Training</u>

Preparation for a TAship should include, but not be restricted to, practical hands-on training for specific duties. It must also include mentoring and monitoring and other forms of support for the continuing development of the TA's instructional abilities.

First and foremost, TA programs must include a significant degree of training at the disciplinary level in order to create a close link to the respective scholarship and values in a given area of study and to reflect the discipline-specific culture of teaching and learning.

While a minimum of mandatory preparation is desirable and necessary, it cannot compensate for a lack of incentives to actively participate in training programs. It is important to offer meaningful incentives and to construct TA training programs that can facilitate and take advantage of many students' intrinsic motivation to develop and improve their teaching skills. Effective programs are motivational, inspirational and personally relevant. TAs deserve and benefit from programs that challenge and encourage them to experiment, to reflect on their teaching, to be creative, to care about teaching, to share ideas and to discover the importance and value of their work. Instructors play a major role in motivating TAs and assisting them in their professional development.

Consistent and ongoing TA assessment and evaluation are necessary for reasons of accountability and improvement, and are thus essential components of effective TA training programs. It is important for TAs both to receive and to provide feedback.

<u>The Role of Faculty and Peers</u>

Because of its significant impact on the quality of the TA experience, special attention has to be given to the quality of the relationship between TAs and their faculty supervisors. Faculty members play an important role in supervising and mentoring TAs. Senior, experienced faculty members and excellent, innovative teachers can make especially valuable contributions to TA training and development programs. Contributions to TA training and development on the part of faculty members and participation in TA programs on the part of students must be recognized and must add real value to the lives of faculty and TAs.

A peer-to-peer element in TA training programs ensures that initiatives are relevant to TA interests, needs and stage of development. Experienced TAs should be encouraged to familiarize beginning TAs with their new roles and should be invited to take responsibility for supervising and mentoring their peers.

B. Improving TA Training

Based on the principles outlined in the previous section, we considered general recommendations for the maintenance and further improvement of the TA training environment at Queen's and discussed new initiatives that should be put in place as soon as possible, preferably for the Fall term 2002.

<u>General Recommendations</u>

Practical hands-on training for specific duties as well as mentoring of TAs and monitoring of their development as instructors, must remain the responsibility of Departments and/or Faculties. We also reaffirm the IDC's role of providing support and advice to academic units. Our first general recommendation recognizes the central place that academic units occupy in the TA training process.

Recommendation 1

That Departments and/or Faculties review their current TA training practices with the goal of creating comprehensive approaches to TA development (including workshops for beginning TAs, support for more experienced TAs and self-directed programs for TAs who want to improve their teaching). That Departments and/or Faculties also review the way they select, mentor, and assess their TAs, formally define their roles and responsibilities and facilitate the resolution of disputes. That Departments and/or Faculties, whenever possible, consider innovative ways to integrate TAs into the discipline-specific teaching and learning environment.

Action: Departments and/or Faculties

In order to facilitate departmental reviews, we recommend designating responsibility for monitoring training practices to a faculty member who is already involved with TA development.

Recommendation 2

That Departments designate an individual who has a special interest in TA training and development and who will be responsible for (a) assessing existing TA practices, and (b) providing a brief annual report to the Department Head (with copies to the respective Faculty Dean, the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, and the IDC).

Action: Departments

Brief annual written reports on TA training activities enable Departments and/or Faculties to monitor and assess their TA training practices on an ongoing basis. In order to provide consistency of reporting throughout the university, the IDC should design a standard report form and keep a central inventory of departmental practices.

Recommendation 3

That the IDC develop a report form and distribute it to Departments and/or Faculties on an annual basis together with additional information about programs, workshops and other training opportunities provided by the IDC. That the IDC keep an inventory of the TA training efforts reported by each academic unit and advise the Vice-Principal (Academic) on TA training activities.

Action: IDC

Keeping track of TA training and development activities within Departments by means of brief annual reports opens up the possibility of including a summary of these efforts in the Internal Academic Reviews in an efficient manner. This allows Departments to assess the effectiveness of their TA training over longer periods of time. Furthermore, incorporating reporting into existing review mechanisms should also extend to encouraging faculty members to include their TA training and development activities in their annual reports. Consistent and regular reporting coupled with a recognition of individuals' contributions to TA training will help to ensure that TA training and development issues remain visible and are seen as central to the university's educational mission.

Recommendation 4

That consideration be given to having Internal Academic Reviews contain a section on TA training and development and faculty members be encouraged to include their TA training and development activities in their annual reports.

Action: *Faculty Deans and Dean of Graduate Studies and Research*

Many Departments already organize TA workshops at the beginning of each academic year and/or at the start of each term. In order to achieve consistency and to prepare TAs for their duties (lab instruction, tutorials, marking etc.) adequately, we recommend that TAs be provided with a contract specifying all duties and training requirements, and that all TAs participate in a mandatory training session of at least three (3) hours before they embark on their assigned tasks. These sessions should include specific preparation for the respective duties of the TAs, a general orientation to the role of TAs at Queen's, and an introduction to other issues relevant to particular duties, such as assessing students' work, leading labs or discussions and communicating effectively. The departmental TA contract should designate the training session as mandatory. Departments may, of course, offer or continue to offer additional voluntary training and development opportunities in the form of workshops, courses or other types of activities deemed appropriate for specific TA tasks.

Recommendation 5

That all TAs receive contracts specifying their duties and training requirements, and that all new TAs participate in a mandatory training session of at least three (3) hours before taking up their assigned duties and that Departments and/or Faculties organize these sessions with assistance from the IDC.

Action: *Departments and/or Faculties and IDC*

New Initiatives

In addition to the general recommendations outlined above, we propose that several new initiatives be developed and implemented which will address either the needs of all TAs or the special circumstances of those TAs whose native languages do not include English.

To assist all TAs at Queen's in their efforts to become effective and informed instructors, we recommend the establishment of a new Program in University Teaching and Learning that consolidates already existing training and development opportunities and offers formal recognition for the accomplishments of TAs as they strive to improve their instructional skills. This self-directed program will contain three components: scholarship (principles of teaching and learning in higher education), professional development and practice in teaching. A detailed description of the program is appended to this report (see *Appendix "G")*.

Recommendation 6

That Queen's implement an optional university-wide Program in University Teaching and Learning, with a Certificate of Completion provided to successful participants by the IDC.

Action: *IDC*

To support graduate students who were required to obtain satisfactory results in an English language proficiency test for admission, we recommend that a mandatory diagnostic assessment of ESL oral proficiency be developed and administered. All new graduate students who fall into this category must pass this supplementary test before they can be employed as TAs. Therefore, the test should be administered after the students have been accepted into a graduate program but before they begin to work as TAs. Those students who demonstrate that they possess adequate oral skills may take up their assigned TA duties immediately.

Recommendation 7

That a mandatory diagnostic assessment of ESL oral proficiency be developed. That all new graduate students who were required to obtain satisfactory results in an English language proficiency test for admission be required to undertake this supplementary assessment before they begin their work as TAs.

Action: *School of English and School of Graduate Studies and Research*

Those graduate students whose English language and communication skills are judged to be inadequate as a result of the diagnostic assessment need to be given the opportunity to improve their proficiency before they can work as TAs. To assist these students in acquiring the communicative competencies necessary for TA work at Queen's, a new course needs to be designed that focuses on teaching strategies, classroom communication skills, cross-cultural awareness and English pronunciation (for a more detailed description see *Appendix "H"*). Students who fail the diagnostic test must take and pass this course before they can work as TAs.

Recommendation 8

That a new term-length course entitled English Language Communication Skills for Teaching Purposes be developed and offered in the fall term. That this course be mandatory for all graduate students who were required to obtain satisfactory results in an English language proficiency test for admission and who have failed the diagnostic test of ESL oral proficiency.

Action: *School of English and IDC*

This course should be supplemented with a voluntary mentoring program to assist students in their efforts to improve their general language skills. The attached chart *(Appendix "I")* summarizes our recommendations regarding mandatory and optional components of TA training at Queen's:

To support these new initiatives and to ensure cohesion, continuity and consistency in these endeavours, we make the following recommendation:

Recommendation 9

That a TA Development Coordinator, associated with the IDC, be hired with the mandate to support departmental training programs, to act as a resource person on TA development for the Queen's community and to coordinate the campus-wide Program in University Teaching and Learning.

Action: *IDC and School of Graduate Studies and Research*

<u>Additional Matters</u>

In addressing the issues mandated by SCAD, members took notice of a number of related matters that were outside the terms of reference of our committee. The following items, among others, were flagged as also meriting attention: ongoing monitoring of TA training and development; evaluation of TAs; and rights and responsibilities of TAs.

To continue to maintain the visibility of issues related to TA training and development at Queen's we would like to see consideration given to establishing an appropriate committee or working group to address these and other issues as needed.

V   Required resources

To implement the new initiatives, the Committee recommends that the following resources be made available:

Mandatory diagnostic ESL test (based on intake of approximately 240 visa students each year at an assessment cost of $12.50 per student: $3,000 (ongoing)

Development of diagnostic test: $1,000 (one-time cost)

New course "English Language Communication Skills for Teaching Purposes": $10,000 (ongoing)

TA Development Coordinator position (PhD required, salary level grade 9): $46,744 (ongoing)

Respectfully submitted,

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