



# Engaging Graduate Students in Educational Development Activities in Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres: A Report

Prepared by:

**Muhammad Adil Arshad, MA, MEd**

**Kimberley A. Grant, PhD**

*Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning*

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## **Introduction and background**

While 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), expanding the students-as partners model (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014) to educational development (ED) activities is a relatively new area of focus (Felten et al., 2019; Marquis, Power, & Yin, 2019).

The authors, a graduate student currently researching the experiences of international Teaching Assistants and an educational developer who led a teaching development certificate program for graduate students, embarked on a research project to learn more about how Canadian teaching and learning centres (TLCs) are partnering with graduate students to design or co-design, lead or co-lead educational development activities. While the engagement of students in ED activities has been recognized as one of the pathways to introduce people to a career in educational development (Linder et al., 2011; McDonald & Stockley, 2008; Meizlish & Wright, 2007), there is little research documenting current practices in Canada.

We began this research by conducting an environmental scan of TLC websites (Arshad & Grant, 2020). This report builds on those initial findings and focuses on the results of a Canada-wide survey, funded in part by a grant from the Educational Developers Caucus of Canada. Through the survey, we found that the engagement of students as partners in educational development is more widespread and has a longer history than was apparent through our website scan.

Our aim is that sharing our findings will a) help TLCs across Canada learn more about how other centres are partnering with graduate students, b) inspire new ways to partner with graduate students in ED, and c) spark further research about different approaches and lived experiences, particularly those of graduate students, in these programs.

## **Survey Overview and Methodology**

The survey was codeveloped by the authors and benefited from the generous feedback of several colleagues in the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning. It was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB20-1909).

We used our review of the available literature, findings from the environmental scan project, and prior experiences of working with and as graduate students in educational development to design survey items about participants' experiences and practices working and partnering with graduate students in educational development activities. We acknowledge that graduate students may fulfill multiple roles in higher education institutions such as teaching assistants, research assistants, sessional instructors, etc. For the purposes of this research, we chose to focus simply on their status as graduate students rather than other potential roles

they may fill. The survey included both closed response and open-ended items to collect information on following research questions:

- In what kinds of ED activities/programs are graduate students engaged as partners?
- What are the key characteristics of these activities?
- How are students recruited and acknowledged for this work?
- What are the aims of TLCs when they engage graduate students in ED activities?
- What kinds of preparation and/or mentorship are students provided for these activities?

We constructed the survey using Qualtrics and distributed it online through both the Educational Developers Caucus of Canada list-serv as well as through an email list created during the initial environmental scan. To create that list, we reviewed the websites of each TLC listed on the 2020 Educational Developer Caucus website (<https://edc.stlhe.ca/learn/centres-list/>) and made note of contacts who were designated as leads for ED programming that appeared to involve partnering with graduate students. As this is an initial exploratory study, we did not restrict survey responses to one person per institution or program. Since participants remained anonymous, it is possible that we received responses from more than one person in each TLC. However, there was very little overlap in program descriptions and responses to open text questions, so it does not seem that this limitation had a significant impact on our findings.

We conducted the survey between April 15 and May 16, 2021 and received 34 responses. Of those, nine respondents did not progress beyond the initial screening questions as they were not currently associated with a TLC (or equivalent) or did not have graduate students working in their TLC. Another four respondents consented to participate but did not actually attempt the survey questions. Therefore, the survey findings presented below are generated from the responses of the 21 participants who confirmed that they are associated with a TLC that engages graduate students in developing/co-developing, facilitating/co-facilitating educational development activities.

## Findings

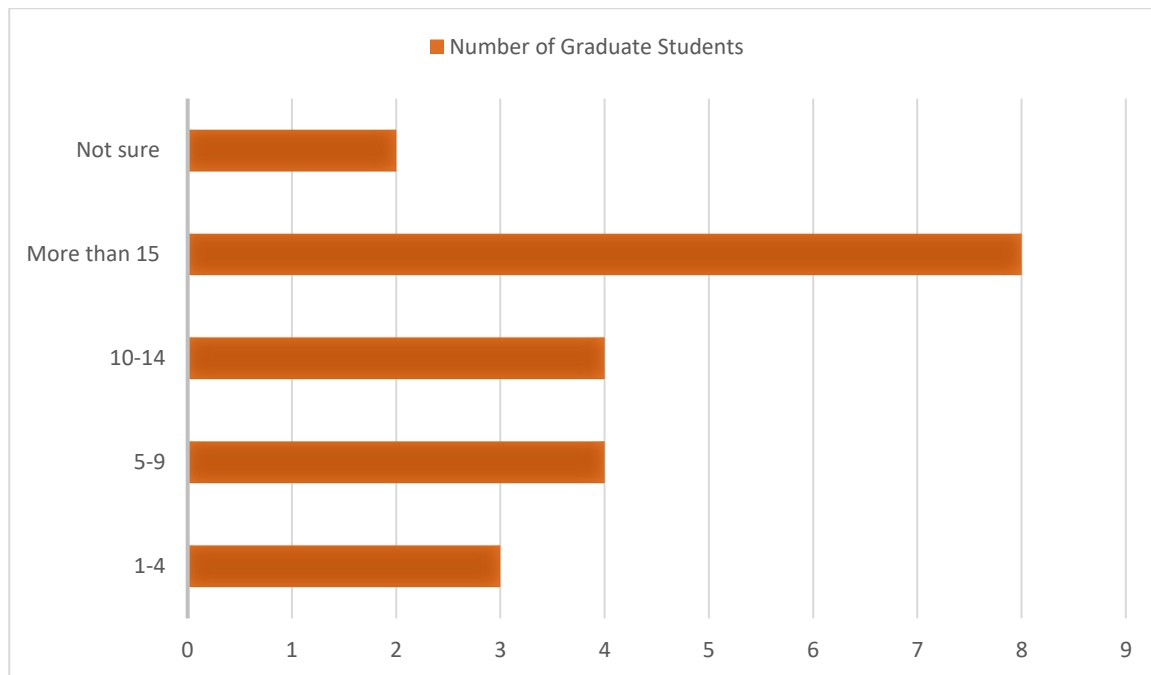
Using tables, figures, and textual commentary, the findings below are organized under four headings that address our research questions.

### 1. Recruitment and Recognition of Graduate Students as Partners in ED

Participants were asked to identify how many graduate students are engaged in educational development activities (not as participants) in their TLC during an average academic year.

**Figure 1**

*Number of Graduate Students Engaged in ED Activities at TLCs*



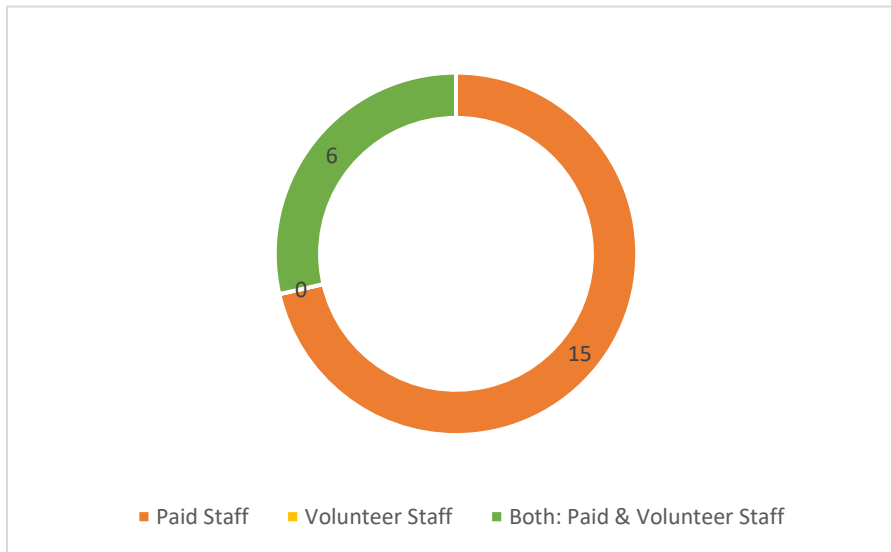
Of the 21 participants who responded to this question, 19 participants identified a numeric range of graduate students engaged at their respective TLCs during an average academic year. The remaining 2 participants selected 'Not sure.' Almost half the participants (n=8) indicated that their TLC engages more than 15 graduate students to assist with educational development activities during an academic year, and the remaining responses were nearly equally distributed across the other options: 1-4 graduate students (3 responses), 5-9 graduate students (4 responses), and 10-14 graduate students (4 responses). While we did not ask about the numbers of graduate student partners in relation to the size of the TLC, responses to this question indicate that there is a sizable number of graduate students engaged in ED activities across Canada every year.

### 1.1. Recruitment and hiring of graduate students

Approximately two-thirds (n=15) of survey respondents indicated that graduate students engaged at their respective TLCs are paid employees (Figure 2). A smaller number (n=6) indicated that they engage graduate students both as paid and volunteer staff members. No respondents indicated that they recruit graduate students as volunteers only.

**Figure 2**

*Distribution of Graduate Student Engagement: Paid or Volunteer*



This distribution mirrors our earlier environmental scan data (Arshad & Grant, 2020) where we looked at the websites and job listings of different Canadian TLCs to learn about the ways graduate students are recruited in educational development roles.

When asked to identify different methods or strategies they use to attract the best candidates for the graduate student positions for their centers, most respondents selected a combination of approaches (Table 1). Posting job opportunities publicly emerged as the most common strategy in the recorded responses (n=18). Using referrals, word of mouth, and networking as a strategy to recruit graduate students was the second most common response (n=12).

**Table 1**

*Frequency Spread of Approaches to Recruit Graduate Students*

| <b>Recruitment Approaches</b>  | <b>n</b> |
|--|----------|
| Posted job opportunities   | 18       |
| Posted volunteer opportunities   | 1        |
| Recruited from participation in other center activities (i.e., as a participant) | 7        |
| Word of mouth, networking, etc.  | 12       |

Table 1 provides a frequency distribution for different recruitment approaches employed at respondents' TLCs.

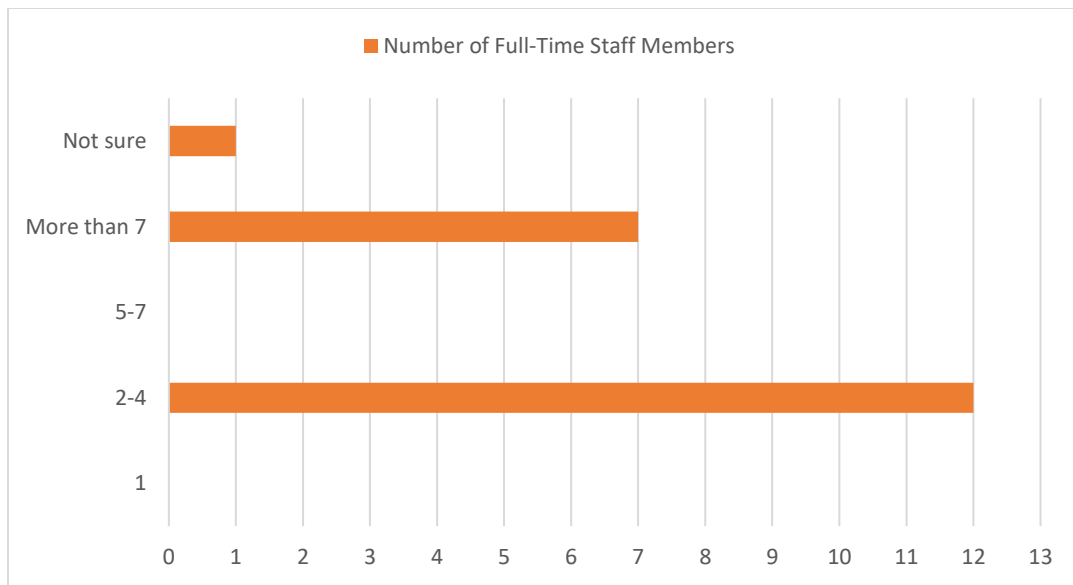
Because the environmental scan indicated that some TLCs engage graduate students as volunteers, we asked survey respondents to identify if they utilize any other methods to acknowledge or compensate graduate students for their work. Two respondents identified that they offered course credits and certificates to graduate students for their contributions as “co-creators” and “co-developers” of instructional programming and resources. Another respondent shared that their TLC provided financial support for “professional development activities for students, e.g., conference participation and trainings.” In addition, one respondent noted that their TLC ensured graduate students engaged in educational development are “publicly acknowledged in newsletters and on the TLC website.”

**1.2 Full-time TLC staff partnering with graduate students**

In another question, we asked the survey participants how many full-time staff members at their respective TLCs partnering with graduate students for educational development activities. More than half (n=12) of the responding participants selected the range “2-4”, followed by 7 respondents who selected “more than 7” option (Figure 3). It seems that both centralized and distributed practices are common. While we did not ask participants to identify the total number of full-time staff in their TLCs, this information implies that there may be two different approaches to partnering with graduate students: 1) having a small number (2-4) of staff who focus on engaging with graduate students, each supervising and mentoring a larger number of students, and 2) having a more distributed approach in which numerous (more than 7) full-time staff engage with graduate students, perhaps supervising and mentoring a smaller number of students each.

**Figure 3**

*Number of Full-Time Staff Partnering with Graduate Student for ED Activities*



## **2. Types of Educational Development Activities and Programs in which Graduate Students are Engaged**

A series of survey questions asked the respondents to identify the types of educational development activities and practices at their respective TLCs in which graduate students are engaged to develop or co-develop (Table 2), lead or co-lead (Table 3). It is quite possible that graduate students are involved in both developing and leading ED activities. However, from our experiences, sometimes those activities are separated such as when graduate students lead workshops that were created by others such as Instructional Skills Workshops or TLC-developed activities. We asked about these activities separately to help capture a more nuanced picture of the types of educational development activities in which graduate students are engaged.

For both questions, a sizable proportion of respondents selected more than one activity from the provided sets of options, suggesting that graduate students generally develop or co-develop, lead or co-lead a variety of different tasks and activities at Canadian TLCs. Overall, supporting graduate student teaching development activities was the most frequently chosen response for both questions (developed/co-developed, n=16; lead/co-lead, n=17), followed by supporting the “use of learning technologies” (developed/co-developed, n=14; lead/co-lead, n=12). Table 2 and Table 3 below outline the range of participant responses on how graduate students are involved in ED activities.



**Table 2***Frequency of ED Programs and Activities that Graduate Student Develop or Co-develop*

| <b>ED Activities and Programs</b>  | <b>n</b> |
|--|----------|
| Graduate student teaching development activities (i.e., teaching assistant orientation, workshops, certificates, etc.) | 16       |
| Programs to support the use of learning technologies   | 14       |
| Faculty teaching development programs  | 10       |
| Scholarship of educational development (SoED) projects and/or scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) projects     | 8        |
| Peer mentorship activities for graduate student teaching development (i.e., teaching assistant peer mentors)           | 6        |

**Table 3***Frequency of ED Programs and Activities that Graduate Student Lead or Co-lead*

| <b>ED Activities and Programs</b>   | <b>n</b> |
|---|----------|
| Facilitating graduate student teaching development activities   | 17       |
| Supporting the use of learning technologies   | 12       |
| Apprenticing with an experienced educational developer  | 9        |
| Working as teaching assistants for educational development programs   | 8        |
| Working as research assistants for scholarly educational development (SoED) and/or scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) projects | 8        |
| Peer mentors for graduate student teaching development  | 5        |

In addition, the survey included follow-up open-ended questions where respondents were invited to list any additional ED activities or programs in which graduate students are engaged. A range of responses were collected including coordinating “work-study programs,” leading “teaching and learning activities for undergraduate students,” providing “feedback and consultation on course design and content,” developing “materials [and resources],” and conducting “research tasks.” A complete list of participant responses is provided in Appendix A.

### 3. Mentorship and Support for Graduate Student as Partners

Because engaging in ED activities is identified as a pathway to careers in educational development (McDonald & Stockley, 2008; Quinn & Vorster, 2014), we also asked participants to identify the mentorship practices for graduate students working at their TLCs (Table 4). Given a list of options, most respondents selected more than one type of program and activity they use to prepare and support graduate students. Many respondents identified that their TLCs use orientation workshops (n=16) and ongoing professional development meetings (n=16) to support and prepare graduate students in ED work. Other frequently noted activities included formal “introductory courses” (n=11) and pairing of graduate students with “educational development mentors” (n=11).

**Table 4**

*Frequency of Practices to Support and Mentor Graduate Students in Educational Development*

| <b>Support and Mentorship Practices</b>   | <b>n</b> |
|---|----------|
| Orientation meeting                       | 16       |
| Ongoing professional development meetings | 16       |
| Introductory Workshop/course              | 11       |
| Paired with educational developer mentor  | 11       |
| Paired with graduate student peer mentor  | 7        |

In response to an open-ended item, respondents shared additional practices that their TLCs employ to help graduate students effectively perform educational development tasks. These activities include participation in “week-long training events and workshops”, “one-on-one consultations” among professional staff and graduate student staff, “check-in meetings” with supervisors, use of “detailed handbook and guide” for newly hired graduate students, and opportunities for “formative feedback.” A complete list of participant responses is provided in Appendix B.

#### **4. Aims and Purposes of Engaging Graduate Students in Educational Development Activities**

In addition to asking about pragmatic details of their partnerships with graduate students, we also asked the participants to outline the overall aims and goals they or their TLCs have in engaging graduate students in ED activities. Respondents shared a wide range aims and purposes for continuing to involve graduate student as partners in the (co)development and (co)facilitation of educational development programming at TLCs. We have organized participant responses using three main themes. Please see Appendix C for a full list of participant responses.

##### **4.1. To provide professional development opportunities for graduate students in educational development skills**

It is clear from survey data that one of the main aims of having graduate student partners at TLCs is to provide opportunities for professional growth and skill development for the graduate students themselves. Graduate student partnership in the (co)development and (co)facilitation of educational development activities not only helps students better understand educational development practice but also equips them with foundational teaching and learning skills to do well in academia in general. A few relevant participant responses are reproduced below:

- “Give student developmental opportunities to learning about educational development”
- “Provide opportunity for grad students to learn behind the scenes in academia”
- “Building individual capacity and skill, introducing the field of educational development”
- “Offer development opportunities, introduce to educational development”
- “To support the development of students”
- “Provide training and development opportunities for students”
- “For them to develop their professional skills and have professional experience on their resumes”
- “Many of our programs support graduate students who are interested in teaching and learning as a future career in some capacity and want some practice before making next steps in their academic careers”

##### **4.2. To incorporate student perspectives and experiences in ED programming**

Several survey participants identified an aim of learning from the perspectives and experiences of graduate students. Graduate students in partnership roles may serve as the eyes and ears of TLCs in multiple contexts across campuses. Their presence and active engagement at the center bring a valuable student voice and perspective to the activities and programs offered at the center. If strategically incorporated, the everyday experiences of graduate student partners support ensuring programming and offerings at the center are responsive to the learning needs of student populations. Here are a few relevant survey responses:

- “Benefit from the student perspective”
- “Gain a student perspective and insight from the expertise of being a student”

- “To enact our philosophy that it's important to have grad student input in the design and delivery of TA/grad student programming”
- “Grounding program perspectives in graduate student experience”
- “Supporting more attuned and informed programming (graduate student input is invaluable to help understand student experience)”
- “To provide peer led opportunities to grad students”
- “Bring student perspective”
- “To ensure the student perspective is considered in the work and outcomes”
- “It is important for us to seek input from students on the design of courses and other learning resources”

### **4.3. To enhance teaching skills and capacity among the institution’s graduate student community**

Improving and developing teaching knowledge, skills, and dispositions is a fundamental mission at TLCs. As discussed earlier, developing resources and facilitating programs for graduate teaching development was the most frequently reported activity for graduate student educational developers. This means that graduate student partners at TLCs often have meaningful opportunities to develop their own teaching skills and practice while also supporting the teaching development of their peers. Therefore, it is not surprising that many survey respondents identified improving graduate student teaching skills one of the aims for engaging graduate students in ED activities:

- “Supporting graduate student teaching development”
- “To provide opportunities for graduate students to continue developing their teaching, facilitation, and presentation skills”
- “To contribute to further building a culture of teaching and learning in our Faculty of Science”
- “Provide graduate students an opportunity to practice their skills, learn about the scholarship behind best practices for teaching and learning, and expand their leadership in teaching and learning”

### **Summary**

Many of the key trends in our survey data add nuance to our general understandings of how graduate students are engaged as partners in ED activities. For example, consistent with our earlier environmental scan findings, we found that graduate student partners have a considerable presence and engagement in the educational development activities offered at Canadian TLCs. More than half of the 21 respondents indicated that they engage 10 or more graduate students in a given academic year. This highlights the important but often hidden role of graduate students in the current practices of TLCs. It also raises important questions about how these experiences impact the future of individuals who move into a career in ED as well as how they impact the field itself.

Our survey data indicate that working with graduate students as partners is widely embraced and enthusiastically supported by educational developers at TLCs in Canada. Most survey respondents appreciated the diversity, “freshness,” and value that graduate students bring to the educational development work. Because, as one respondent noted, “graduate student input is invaluable to help understand student experience,” engaging students in ED activities provides mutual benefits. These activities provide opportunities for graduate students to develop their teaching and facilitation skills as well as gain experience in the field of educational development. At the same time, they help TLCs stay attuned and responsive to the needs of graduate students who participate in their programs.

Graduate students are engaging in a wide variety of ED activities, most frequently in developing and facilitating programming for graduate teaching development. Given the many comments acknowledging the value of having graduate students provide insight into the needs and experiences of their peers, this is not a surprising correlation. The next most frequently cited ED activities - programs to support the use of learning technologies – may reflect the timing of the survey in mid-2021 as these supports had become increasingly important during the shift to online delivery of classes due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Our survey findings, ED literature, and our own experiences all confirm that engaging in ED activities as a graduate student is a common pathway into a career in ED. Thus, it is important to highlight strategies designed to support and mentor graduate student partners. The most frequently mentioned were orientation meetings and ongoing professional development consultations with supervisors; however, peer mentoring and informal “check ins” were also highlighted. Future research from the perspective of graduate students will be valuable to find out which strategies are most effective.

The findings of this study provide a general overview of the ways in which Canadian TLCs are partnering with graduate students in ED activities. We hope that this information provides opportunities for reflection among educational developers who currently partner with graduate students and those who would like to in the future. We also hope that this preliminary study will inspire for future research on this topic.

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## Appendix A

### Open-ended Responses for Activities and Programs that Engage Graduate Students as Partners

**Q 15: Are there other activities not listed above in which graduate students participate in developing/co-developing? If so, please describe them.**

We offer a range of student learning and development workshops, which they are involved in design, development and delivery, but under the supervision of a staff member.

Co-creation and feedback on course design for courses in their program of study. Graduate students (at the college level I will confirm that these are students enrolled in Graduate Certificates) are consulted and hired to provide feedback on course design and content.

Running of town halls, facilitating focus group discussions and writing up reports, survey analysis.

ITA materials development

Leading activities for undergrad students related to teaching and learning

Work study programs and their related projects

Training new facilitators; consulting with different units on campus as part of workshop design process.

Our educational development associates (EDAs) also provide educational development consultations for graduate students, postdocs and adjunct, classroom teaching observations, guest lecture in the graduate-level course on teaching and learning offered by the centre, resource development and curriculum development for graduate professional development of teaching.

Student partners programming, which may include some of the above, but also quality assurance, curricular mapping, etc.

## Appendix B

### Open-ended Responses for Mentoring and Support Provided to Graduate Students as Partners

**Q 13: Are there other ways in which graduate students are prepared for and/or supported in their roles in your centre? If so, please describe.**

On going informal meetings in the office. We have an open door policy and always enjoy chatting about teaching and learning, and Ed Development practices with graduate student facilitators on our team.

One educational developer (or post-doctoral fellow) in the unit oversees the Educational Development Associate (EDA) program as a part of their ED portfolio. They take responsibility to mentor the 3 graduate students working in the centre during the academic year.

Teaching assistant certificate, 3 levels

We have detailed handbooks/guides for each of the two roles that grad students have at our Centre. Grad students are invited to participate in PD events hosted by our Centre and they are included in the Centre's staff listserv which often highlights various PD opportunities and teaching resources. Our grad-student staff are graduates of our introductory teaching certificate program so they are familiar with program content and structure. We also encourage our grad staff to consult our collection of teaching tips (over 100) which offer a useful practice-focused overview of various teaching topics.

While we don't have a formal mentorship program, the students do have peer activities and ongoing discussions with staff members. We do check-in meetings during the term, pre-COVID and now as well.

Regular check in meetings, as well as a Teams Group for frequent communications; they are often assigned to facilitate in pairs or work on projects as a group as well, but this is not formally considered a mentorship model.

Ongoing mentorship from any staff member they work alongside; program structures (meetings, reflections)

Graduate students are often prepared by their faculty for the work of co-creation. Typically it is specific to their field of study.

Week-long training events; practice with colleagues; check-ins; one-on-one consultations; formative feedback

Rather than being paired with one specific educational development mentor, grad students may be matched with different professionals/members of our unit. It's a model that's a type of mentoring network combined with cognitive apprenticeship



## Appendix C

### Open-ended Responses for the Aims and Purposes of having Graduate Students as Partners

| <b>Q 17: What are the overall aims or purposes of having graduate students engage in educational development activities in your centre?</b>   |
|---|
| Benefit from the student perspective. Provide opportunity for grad students to learn behind the scenes in academia, re. teaching, and inspire them to think about education in different ways.  |
| Grounding program perspectives in graduate student experience. Providing leadership opportunities. Peer support for other graduate students.  |
| -Capacity building - opportunities for skill development<br>-Broadening the ED community<br>-Opportunities to showcase the ED profession<br>-Development, coordinating, and facilitating graduate programming at the centre (orientation events, teaching development day, workshops)   |
| supporting graduate student teaching development  |
| Gain a student perspective and insight from the expertise of being a student. Give student developmental opportunities to learning about educational development.   |
| 1. to enable us to offer a range of workshops, microteaching and teaching observations to a large number of grad students across campus<br>2. to provide opportunities for graduate students to continue developing their teaching, facilitation and presentation skills<br>3. to enact our philosophy that it's important to have grad student input in the design and delivery of TA/grad student programming |
| Building individual capacity and skills, supporting more attuned and informed programming (graduate student input is invaluable to help understand student experience), introducing the field of educational development  |
| For them to help instructors and for them to both develop their professional skills and have professional experience on their resumes   |
| 1) Bring student perspective; 2) Amplify our capacity; 3) Provide training and development opportunities for students   |
| To support the development of students; to ensure the student perspective is considered in the work and outcomes; to provide peer led opportunities to grad students  |
| It is important for us to seek input from students on the design of courses and other learning resources. This is a new practice at our college and there are some specific ties to eCampusOntario online course design projects. In this case, the graduate students will be paid staff with an equitable voice in resource designs and learning experiences.  |
| Gain student perspective, offer development opportunities, introduce to educational development   |
| To contribute to further building a culture of teaching and learning in our Faculty of Science  |
| The graduate student educational developers help develop programming and resources and facilitate workshops and training sessions.  |
| Provide graduate students an opportunity to practice their skills, learn about the scholarship  |

behind best practices for teaching and learning, and expand their leadership in teaching and learning. Many of our programs support graduate students who are interested in teaching and learning as a future career in some capacity and want some practice before making next steps in their academic careers