

CAMPUS LIFE

The woes and wonders of being A TEACHING ASSISTANT

University is more than just learning lecture slides and filling out MCQ sheets. There's room to learn so much outside of the class, with opportunities awaiting those willing to take advantage of them. One of those opportunities is a teaching assistantship. While the prospect may sound enticing, it comes with its own kind of stress. So, why exactly do students choose to become teaching assistants (TA)? And is it worth the effort?



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"I chose to become a TA primarily to develop networking and organisational skills, as well as to earn extra income," said Sumaiya Nasrin Sadiya, a teaching assistant at the Department of Physical Sciences of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). Being a TA requires you to regularly interact with students and faculty alike, making it the perfect environment to nurture effective communication skills. Not only that but you can also forge fruitful relationships with faculty members, whose mentorship, advice, and even recommendation letters may prove invaluable down the line.

Often in universities that operate under an open credit system, it is difficult for one to feel like they're part of a community as students are likely to have different course mates every semester. However, being a TA can change that.

"You get to meet other like-minded individuals who share the same passion for your major as you do," explained Aleha Wasimat, a TA at the Department of Economics of North South University. When you are a TA, you find a group of people that you can constantly turn to, giving you the opportunity to form friendships.

There is also something to be said about the satisfaction of helping people, which is at the core of a teaching assistantship. You stand by the brightest minds of our country, helping them prepare become the next generation of scholars.

"The best part is how rewarding it feels to help students. I really enjoy receiving their respect and seeing them succeed," said Sumaiya. Witnessing one's service tangibly benefit people's lives is a gift that not many jobs can offer.

However, just like any other job, it is not all sunshine and rainbows, and a teaching assistantship comes with its own share of drawbacks.

"I continuously have to handle checking the students' scripts and assist them even if I am at a crucial moment for my own studies," said Ramisa Tasnim, a TA at the Department of English at East West University (EWU). This is one of the biggest problems that TAs tend to face – one that was echoed by all those who were interviewed. When exam season comes around, not only do their own study load increase, but it is accompanied with an uptick in script checking and exam proctoring duties. This can prove to be unbearable for many as their grades may take a hit.

Another concern that the TAs emphasised on was the pay. They all stated that the remuneration they receive is not sufficient, considering the amount of work they have to do. Therefore, those who are looking to become a TA purely for the money should reconsider, as it will likely leave much to be desired. Furthermore, this reflects the general treatment of TAs, where they may be expected to do tasks that are not in the job description.

"Mismanagement of the department are the major reasons for the workload being more intolerable than it should be," said Ramisa, highlighting the responsibility university authorities have in ensuring TAs are treated fairly.

"Some faculties may expect you to help them with their personal research projects, such as doing literature reviews," said Aleha. While the added responsibility has its own set of pros and cons, the extra workload could prove to be too much for some to handle. For others, however, it is an opportunity to hone their research skills and gain valuable experience from experts in their field.

"Although it is reasonably possible that additional work can be done within the office hours when there is no active student consultation, the TA should have the right to refuse it without prejudice," asserted Dr Gazi M Hassan, Professor at the Department of Economics at NSU. This highlights the importance of on-campus employment that is rarely discussed – the right to refuse additional work. Even if additional duties are assigned, the expectation for students to carry them out must be communicated and remuneration adjusted accordingly.

All of this just goes to show just how much your experience as a TA can vary. Not every TA will have the same workload. In fact, it may vary based on the faculty member they have to work with or courses that they are assigned. For instance, if one is assigned a faculty member that focuses heavily on exams and assignments, then naturally the workload will be higher when it comes to script checking. Also, some particularly demanding classes may have a large fraction of students who are struggling, with whom TAs might have to spend a lot of time explaining concepts and helping with coursework during office hours.

At the end of the day, being a TA is not for everyone. No job is. But if one has the work ethic for it and is able to leverage the opportunities it opens up, then it might just be the right fit. It is a great addition to anyone's CV, especially those who hope to pursue a career in academia. Thus, the question of whether or not being a TA is worth the effort depends largely on the individual and what they make of the opportunity.

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