

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Guidelines for Teaching Assistants

cwl17.0020

In its meeting of 30 March 2017, the Faculty Board set down the FASoS guidelines for Teaching Assistants.

1. Introduction

In line with its Strategic Plan (2016-20) and its 'Strategic Personnel Plan for Academic Staff', the Faculty will continue to work with a substantial number of Teaching Assistants (TAs, UFO job profile: Teacher 4 (UK), Docent 4 (NL)). On average, it is expected that TAs will represent 20-22% of the total academic staff.

As a staff category, TAs are important to FASoS in the context of its intensive education system of Problem Based Learning (PBL), the didactic model on which education within the UM is based. In addition, TAs bring the required flexibility to cope with fluctuations in student numbers. They are formally appointed in temporary TA positions. Because they make a positive and important contribution to the Faculty's overall teaching effort, FASoS aims to provide active career support for those TAs it employs for a period of three years. Being part of FASoS's exciting teaching and research community includes the possibility to discuss personal development and ideas for the future.

The TA position is a 100% teaching position and has no research component. As a general rule, the TA position is occupied by academic staff with a strong affinity with teaching and PBL, who have completed a relevant MA, and do not have a doctorate. They have excellent knowledge of English, and good knowledge of Dutch is an asset. TAs are offered temporary employment contracts, and will be supported in developing future careers mainly for the external job market.

2. Recruitment procedure

The recruitment of TAs falls under the general rules and procedures of FASoS staff members (see 'Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Personnel Selection Procedure' 2 March 2016, cwl16.0061). As stipulated under point 7 of this document, the committee consists of three members and is composed as follows:

- Programme Director of the programme in which the colleague to be selected will mainly be teaching (chair);
- 1 UD, UHD or HL from the department of which the TA vacancy is part;
- 1 UD, UHD or HL from one of the other departments.

The committee must have at least one female member.

Prior to the selection interviews with a limited number of candidates, the selection committee holds a preparatory consultation meeting with the HR advisor on the selection process and the criteria for selection in light of the required competencies. At this meeting the committee also identifies the candidates who will be invited for an interview. After the interviews, the selection committee submits a ranking of eligible candidates (according to the criteria) to the Faculty Board for decision-making.

3. Employment possibilities of Teaching Assistants

The TA employment contract follows the following template:

- The contract amounts to maximum 0.8 fte, to allow optimal scheduling and task assignment throughout the academic year.

- TAs are appointed for a period of three years. The appointment entails a non-recurring employment contract based on article 2.2a of the Collective Labour Agreement for Dutch Universities, without the possibility of extension or renewal.
- As a rule, the duties of a TA will not involve research, research proposals or preparation for a PhD position.

This non-recurring employment contract can be offered to candidates who have not had a prior UM employment contract, or whose previous UM employment contract ended at least six months and one day before the start of the (possible) new appointment.

In the case of unforeseen changes in the TA formation or the needs of the faculty, it is possible to make exceptions to the above template. If someone works (or has already worked less than six months before) at Maastricht University, an employment contract as a TA may be offered for a maximum total term of two years, based on restrictions in the Collective Labour Agreement of Dutch Universities. The term of this maximum period of two years is to be counted from the starting date of their first appointment at Maastricht University.

Although it is formal UM policy that academic staff members always need to have a PhD degree in order to be able to apply for a permanent position, it may under very exceptional situations be possible for the Faculty Board of FASoS to appoint a TA on a permanent contract. Such exceptions are only for highly talented teaching staff with very specific expertise or relevant networks. This will normally involve part-time positions only, possibly in combination with a relevant part-time position outside of the university.

4. TA tasks and the distribution of the teaching load

TAs' main task is guiding student groups in BA programmes. They act predominantly as tutors to support students in their process of gathering knowledge, encourage them to work together, and coach them to study independently.

The tutorial work of the TA revolves around six core tasks:

- Studying the course material
- Implementing the course coordinators' instructions in his/her own tutorial group(s)
- Stimulating the students' learning process
- Optimizing the group dynamics
- Assessing and grading of the exam(s)
- Evaluating the course

This document places these six core tasks in a broader context, along the three stages of delivery of a course: preparation, execution and evaluation.

TAs have the possibility to obtain their BKO certificate. Developing teaching materials (such as delivering lectures or writing PBL assignments) does not belong to the core tasks of a TA. Nevertheless, TAs can contribute to such activities (e.g. by becoming a temporary member of a course planning group) in relation to the completion of their BKO portfolio and their own development.

4.1 Preparation of the course

In consultation with programme directors, the TA signs in for courses via the SOLVER system. At least two weeks in advance of the course, the TA will be invited by the course coordinator for the first tutor instruction meeting. Preparations include the reading of the mandatory course materials such as the course book, tutor instructions and the assigned course literature.

4.2 Execution of the course

As a tutor, the TA has an active and encouraging role in the students' learning process by preparing well for the group meetings; being an active listener; stimulating the students' thought processes and line of argumentation; being aware of group processes and the role of the individual student, etc. An important task in this role as tutor is to initiate feedback sessions: breaks in which students are stimulated to reflect on the course itself, the group performance and their individual contribution to the group. Such moments provide a TA with the opportunity to influence group dynamics and individual behavior. Further, the sessions give students feedback about relevant generic (PBL) skills.

As tutor, being responsible for tutorial meetings, the TA registers student participation on the attendance sheets during every student group meeting and submits these to the course coordinator at the end of the course. Students who are not mentioned on the attendance sheet, and do not have a so called 'schedule form', should be referred to the Front Office. In his/her role as tutor the TA follows the guidelines from the course coordinator in order to ensure the consistency among the different tutorial groups, and attends all tutor meetings.

The course coordinator allocates the work to be graded (i.e. course exams including resit) to the tutors. The TA is expected to follow the guidelines from the course coordinator on this matter in order to detect plagiarism and ensure the fairness and consistency of the grading process. To discuss the graded examinations tutors should communicate only with the course coordinator. The course coordinator collects all data, checks whether marking has been consistent, and submits the final results to the Exam Administration.

If a TA is ill or absent while acting as a tutor (s)he should notify his/her department secretary and course coordinator as soon as possible, but always before the start of their first tutorial group meeting.

4.3 Evaluation of the course

Once the course has been delivered, various evaluations take place. As tutor the TA prompts and motivates students to complete the IWIO evaluations. The IWIO evaluation is completed by students during the last tutorial group meeting. Exams will be evaluated separately through an online survey. The course coordinator invites tutors to give feedback on the course (during a feedback session after the course which serves as the third tutor meeting). The TA should also attend this meeting.

5. Distribution of teaching load

TAs have a teaching load of 100% within their 0.8 fte appointment. During each year of the appointment the Faculty foresees the possibility to set aside part of this time for specific tasks. In general, this means that in their first year, TAs will receive PBL training through a course provided by a PBL trainer. The training deals with the basic knowledge and, in particular, skills needed by a tutor at FASoS. Course specific information and instructions will be provided by the course coordinator. TAs receive course specific instruction from the course coordinator, who may also invite them to contribute to the design of the course. For the purpose of learning and further professionalization on the job, 10% of the TA's teaching load is set aside.

During the second year of appointment, a yearly specified amount of SOLVER hours, based on faculty policy, is set aside for obtaining a Basiskwalificatie Onderwijs (BKO)/University Teaching Qualification (UTQ). The TA is guided in this process by a coach, who is a senior member of the academic staff. The qualification demonstrates teaching experience, and can be obtained by following workshops and compiling a teaching portfolio to be submitted to an assessment committee. This portfolio contains relevant material illustrating the teaching activities, and (improvement in) teaching qualities of the TA involved both within the faculty and to the outside world. In the second and third year of their appointment, TA's will be given the opportunity to prepare to continue their career outside FASoS through career counselling.

In the third year, there is a possibility to set aside 10% of the TA's teaching load in order to actively explore career opportunities after their TA appointment. This involves the development of a detailed plan on how the allocated time will be used. This can include time for preparing job applications, including PhD applications; networking; taking relevant trainings at the UM career centre etc. The director of FASoS (advised by the Programme Director and HR advisor) is responsible for approving the plan.

6. Supervision and assessment

The TA will be appointed in the department closest to his/her expertise/background. The Programme Director of the BA programme in which the TA will mainly be teaching will be assigned as both the administrative and line manager, and takes the role of supervising and supporting the TA. The Programme Director is responsible for the assignment of teaching load (especially, but not only limited to, the first TA year), conducting formal meetings such as the appointment interview, and the yearly assessment interview.

The TA will have a yearly assessment interview with the designated Programme Director in presence of the HR advisor in the month of May or June. The Programme Director will ask for input from the other Programme Director where the TA teaches in both the ES and A&C programmes. Other stakeholders such as the head of department and relevant course coordinators will also be asked for input on the performance of the TA. TA coaches will explicitly not be asked to assess the TA, but will be asked for input on his/her performance, while keeping the confidentiality between them and the TA in mind. Paragraph 7 below provides more information on the role of coaches.

The HR assistant will prepare the assessment interview by inviting the TA, Programme Director and HR advisor, and by pre-filling the relevant fields in the assessment interview form (like personal information, core activities and competences) that will be sent to all parties involved beforehand so they can prepare properly. The Programme Director is responsible for filling in the report of the assessment meeting. The final report will be signed by the Programme Director and the TA, and a copy sent to the TA and archived in his/her personnel file.

In case of a negative assessment, FASoS will support the TA in improving his/her performance through an improvement trajectory which involves (for example) extensive guidance and training and further monitoring through regular assessment. Guidance can be provided as to options available in the external job market. If the improvement trajectory does not lead to a sufficient improvement in the performance of the TA, the appointment may be ended before the end of the third year.

7. TA coaching

Every new TA will be assigned to an educational coach. An educational coach is a more experienced FASoS colleague from the academic staff who guides, supports and coaches new TAs in the first year of their appointment. Support may include getting to know the position of TAs in the faculty, the ins and outs of the faculty, also in relation to questions and uncertainties concerning the role and responsibilities of the TA, reflecting on the teaching process, etc.

Specific tasks for educational coaches include:

1. Attending two tutorials of the TA and inviting the TA to attend one of his/her own tutorials (or a tutorial from another experienced member of the academic staff). This allows for the sharing and evaluation of teaching experiences;
2. Taking part in two meetings in which the TA will be prepared for correcting two different types of exams. The main focus will be on the way the TA corrects the exams, and to the tone of voice and feedback style of the TA;
3. Meetings every three weeks, between the start of the academic year and the Christmas break, with a group of TA's (guided by the same coach) to discuss (and if possible solve) challenges and opportunities of teaching;
4. To be the first point of contact during the whole first year of the TA.

8. HR and terms of employment

Throughout the duration of their appointment, TAs can consult the HR advisor on questions regarding (for example) their wellbeing, career planning, ambitions, mobility, health situation, or the relation to their programme director and line manager. Meetings between the HR advisor and TA are confidential, and information will only be shared with third persons with the agreement of the TA.

The terms of employment, i.e. the rights and duties pertaining to employment and remuneration, are explained to the TA in the appointment interview in the presence of the Programme Director and the HR advisor. They are successively confirmed in the appointment letter prepared by HR.

The position of TA always matches with salary scale 10 in the Collective Labour Agreement for Dutch Universities. The awarded grade within this scale is dependent on the relevant (academic) teaching experience the TA has acquired prior to the start of the appointment at FASoS.

Leave hours are a standard part of every appointment at the university. The total number of contractual hours of the TA minus the teaching load and the leave hours amounts to zero. Therefore leave hours can never be paid at the end of the employment contract. This is the execution of the provision mentioned in article 8.2 of the Collective Labour Agreement for Dutch Universities. This article states that the employee should be given the opportunity to use previously accumulated holiday/leave entitlements before the end of the employment contract. The only exception to this rule is the assignment of extra tasks by the Programme Director, and registration of these tasks in the personnel file of the TA before they are performed.

TAs have limited disposal over their own leave hours, since they have a 100% teaching job and their working schedule is defined by their course schedule. The position does however offer some flexibility since for example course preparation and grading can (within certain boundaries) be scheduled at one's own discretion.

TAs can use the CAO Keuzemodel, but this will result in a higher teaching load, since the use of leave hours for other purposes than leave will result in a higher workload. This also counts for other (academic) positions, where the teaching percentage of the hours used in the CAO Keuzemodel will also be added to the SOLVER account.

Further explanations and details on the general terms of employment at Maastricht University can be found at: <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/support/um-employees/you-and-your-work/employment-conditions>.