Exploring teaching assistants' employment in higher education: a case of Qatar University

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Abstract: Within higher education, the employment of graduate teaching assistants has become an international phenomenon that deserves further investigation. The current literature on teaching assistants' experiences in higher education was reviewed with the aim of highlighting differences in the employment process of teaching assistants globally but this paper mainly reports on empirical research exploring these issues in a neglected region, the Gulf region, particularly Qatar. A survey was administered to 80 Qatari teaching assistants at Qatar University. The conceptual model was empirically tested utilising structural equation modelling (SMART PLS) to analyse the relationship between teaching assistants' employment practices and their intention to leave. Effective recruitment and selection and training and development both had a significant negative impact on intention to leave, the study failed to confirm a link between self-efficacy and intention to leave. This study was also able to provide a preliminary model to assess TA employment within higher education.

Keywords: higher education; graduate teaching assistants; Qatar; recruitment and selection; self-efficacy; training and development; intention to leave.

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Yara Ali, with an MSc in Marketing from Qatar University, currently serves as a research associate in the College of Business and Economics. A burgeoning researcher, she explores diverse realms, including the FIFA World Cup 2022 Qatar, investigating aspects like volunteerism and the host country's perception shift. She venturing into research on management practices and local dynamics within the GCC region, particularly in higher education and the banking sector, reflects her evolving interests. Her thesis centered on social media engagement practices for small-to-medium enterprises in Qatar, examining their impact on brand innovation and sustainable competitive advantage.

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1   Introduction

Teaching assistants (TAs) play a major role in higher education (HE). They can be postgrad students who have been assigned a TA position on a part- or full-time basis. Their responsibilities vary across HE institutions, countries, and regions. The duties assigned to them range from lecturing and tutoring to merely assisting with teaching, such as assessment grading and monitoring course materials and websites (Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko, 2020).

Different terms are used to describe TAs, such as graduate teaching assistants (Winter et al., 2015), tutors (McLachlan and Hagger, 2010), teaching assistants (Bomotti, 1994), and graduate teaching fellows (Slevin, 1992). TAs are employed in a variety of forms, such as full-time (Muzaka, 2009), part-time (Husbands and Davies, 2000), and casual academic staff (May et al., 2013).

This study addressed the full-time employment of TAs in the HE sectors. Although TA employment has become integral to, HE, few studies have explored TA employment processes and whether differences exist in their employment around the world.

This study had two objectives: First, to provide a comparative analysis of some forms of employment for TAs in HE in well-known regions, particularly Australia, USA, and UK. Second, to explore the employment of TAs in the Gulf region, particularly in Qatar. This paper presents the results of an empirical study conducted for this purpose.

In response to the increasing need for TAs in HE, it is vital to provide a clear definition of the roles TAs play at the colleges or universities where they work, considering that they have context-specific roles. TAs are responsible for providing instructional support to faculty members by teaching undergraduate students or providing tutorial sessions (Nichols and Lupascu, 2020).

Additionally, they may be responsible for performing administrative duties (Blouin and Moss, 2015). Most TAs are given the opportunity to teach in classroom settings on a

semester basis, whereas others may spend limited time in the classroom (Nichols and Lupascu, 2020). Some TAs deliver all laboratories or full classes (Luft et al., 2004), whereas others are tasked with grading assessment papers and/or helping with proctoring exams (Parker et al., 2015).

As per Rubie-Davies et al. (2010), TAs, although they contribute to pupils' education and are 'teaching' in some sense, they are not considered teachers or in other words, primary educators. However, their 'teaching' complements teachers'; hence TAs are considered multi-tasking workforce and therefore, there is a need to explore this TAs' utilisation more to understand the nature of their roles globally.

Regarding employment practices, most HE institutions follow an established employment process as per their employment policies; hence, they must use all HR-related functions when hiring TAs, such as rigid recruitment procedures and providing consistent training.

One of the aims of this study was to provide a comparison of the employment processes for TAs in leading HE countries (USA, UK, and Australia). These countries have good reputations for providing higher-quality education to local and international students.

2 Literature review

2.1 TA employment in US

In US, TAs are called graduate teaching assistants, which is a recognised position (Park, 2004). They are allocated a teaching workload under the oversight of a faculty member (Flora, 2007). They are usually employed on a contractual basis that specifies the duration and minimum eligibility requirements related to their progress towards a graduate degree. There has been an argument regarding whether graduate TAs should be regarded as students or employees of HE institutes. At state universities, graduate TAs are represented by various unions and associations such as the American Federation of Teachers. However, the employment relationship of graduate TAs in private universities is unclear. They are primarily considered students because their relationship with the university is mainly educational and not economic (Flora, 2007).

Higher institutions in US possess vast experience in developing a successful graduate TA system (Park, 2004). The main role of graduate TAs is to decrease the teaching load on the faculty. However, they can also obtain funds for postgraduate students and gain work experience, particularly in teaching (Wald and Harland, 2020). Within their employment, a very effective recruitment system is essential to ensure that the selected TAs are capable of taking on a teaching load, including criteria such as previous work experience in teaching or prior knowledge of the subject, as well as effective written and oral language proficiency (Park, 2004).

In terms of the induction of graduate TAs, carefully constructed programs at both department and institutional levels are provided. This early socialisation process plays a significant role in shaping them as future academics (Staton and Darling, 1989). Most universities provide an orientation that is not mandatory, and the department will accordingly provide training later on (Parker et al., 2015). Hence, graduate TAs rely mainly on experiences on the job, rather than prior training or induction (Chadha, 2013).

Training programs for graduate TAs also include faculty mentoring and courses in college teaching (Bartlett, 2003; Gaia et al., 2003). Graduate TAs are usually supervised by course leaders through peer mentoring, which assigns an experienced graduate TA to mentor a new one (Park, 2004). The main aim of mentoring programs is to professionally develop graduate TAs and prepare them to take on academic roles in the future, and the supervisor or mentor plays a major role in this (Gallego, 2014).

The training is intended to build knowledge and experience, assist TAs with the fundamentals of teaching, and mentor them at work (Gagliardi et al., 2014). Constructivist strategies are used, including problem-solving, discussions of teaching experiences, group work, having an observer, and utilising peer activities (Etkina, 2000; Park, 2004). Lowman and Mathie's (1993) review of graduate TA manuals concluded that some techniques used for training include socialisation and interpersonal aspects, but these aspects are not as important as teaching basics such as syllabus design and taking on a class for the first time. The effectiveness of training programs is usually assessed through student feedback, self-evaluation, and in-class assessment (Young and Bippus, 2008).

2.2 TA employment in UK

Graduate TAs are defined in UK context as postgraduate students who teach on a part-time paid basis while embarking on supervised research as students (Park and Ramos, 2002). Since the early 1990s, TAs at UK universities have assumed a larger role in teaching undergraduate students (Muzaka, 2009). Despite this, research in this area is still underdeveloped compared to that in US. Evidence has shown that there is no systematic process for recruiting graduate TAs in UK institutions (Park and Ramos, 2002). Students are selected primarily based on their research capabilities. After being admitted as research students, they are considered for teaching positions on an ad hoc basis. A case study conducted by Park and Ramos (2002) at a leading university showed no evidence of advertising for graduate TA positions and no formal interviews were used in the hiring process.

The department head is usually responsible for hiring decisions. Graduate TAs are usually assigned the teaching courses they wish to teach, and they may be assigned several other tasks, such as being responsible for lab and fieldwork, leading seminars, and discussion groups. Muzaka (2009) found that students' main issue with TAs was not only their lower competency in teaching, but also their lack of knowledge.

Evidence indicates an ineffective induction process for graduate TAs. Departments perceive the induction process as time-consuming and costly (Park and Ramos, 2002). According to Muzaka (2009), graduate TAs are not prioritised in training related to departmental procedures and policies, which can lead to inadequate preparation for teaching assignments. There is evidence that departments face challenges in ensuring effective induction, support, and coordination for graduate TAs (Muzaka, 2009).

Training and development (T&D) programs that focus on improving teaching skills for graduate TAs are less organised and not as commonly administered in UK institutions, as training is perceived as a recommended practice but is not compulsory (Park and Ramos, 2002). HE institutions have begun to recognise the need to introduce a variety of training programs that integrate research with the teaching of graduate TAs (Fuller et al., 2010).

The University of Sheffield offers postgraduate certificates in HE to graduate TAs (Winter et al., 2015). However, these training programs are still too general and focus only on generic teaching skills. Another important challenge is providing proper training for international graduate TAs who bring with them cultural characteristics that may influence their teaching practices (Winter et al., 2015). Graduate TAs in UK institutions do not have control over matters related to course materials, delivery, or assessment (Park and Ramos, 2002). They are not engaged in systematic professional programs (Muzaka, 2009). This can influence their perceived sense of identity and values. In general, graduate TAs at UK universities lack the autonomy to exhibit academic leadership. They are perceived as postgraduate students who contribute to undergraduate teaching (Fairbrother, 2012) and although TAs has extended interactions with pupils generally, which should enhance academic performance and hence enhance organisational performance and reputation, this has not been found to be true in UK (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010).

2.3 TA employment in Australia

TAs at Australian universities are called 'casual' academics. This definition pertains to casual tutors and graduate students who take on part-time teaching loads (Percy et al., 2008). This is especially true because the increased enrolment of students in Australian universities has led to an expansion in casual academics by 20–25% (Crawford and Germov, 2015), a trend comparable to that of many Western countries. Sessional academics account for as much as half of the teaching load at Australian universities. Their roles include tutors, casual markers, course coordinators, demonstrators, laboratory supervisors, and practicing professionals (Percy et al., 2008).

Australian universities have witnessed an increased casualisation of academic staff characterised by flexible work and insecure employment terms (Crawford and Germov, 2015). Nowadays, many Australian universities are required to improve their efficiency and performance, ensure technology-based innovation in teaching and learning, and enhance their global reputation. They are under increased pressure to support casual academics, but there are still no formal procedures or policies for the employment of casual staff within Australian HE institutions (Percy et al., 2008).

Employment formalities are usually undertaken at the departmental level with no interference from human resources staff. Crawford and Germov's (2015) study at the University of Newcastle in Australia confirmed the lack of formal recruitment procedures for casual staff. Moreover, induction training usually focuses on policies and procedures rather than academic aspects (Percy et al., 2008). However, in some cases, formal websites have been established that include support guides for casual academics on many aspects related to HR systems, teaching resources, and key information regarding the orientation process (Crawford and Germov, 2015).

However, based on the New Employment Service Model (post-COVID), Australian universities have lowered their operational expenditures and implemented an array of fiscal management initiatives. Employee expenditures often account for 50–60% of institutional expenditures; therefore, staffing methods such as salary freezes, reduced leave balances, and voluntary and involuntary redundancies are frequently explored. Reducing casual employees, or TAs in this case, is one of the most immediate and quickest budget reduction solutions (Bare et al., 2020). Up to 60% of teaching at Australian institutions is done by temporary personnel; therefore, eliminating casual

academic teaching is not without its hazards (Bare et al., 2020). Professional development in casual academics is rare, and career development programs are often unavailable (Percy et al., 2008). Moreover, instant communication with casual staff usually occurs through staff email accounts, quarterly newsletters, and presentations with key leadership groups (Crawford and Germov, 2015).

2.4   Comparison of TA employment across UK, USA, and Australia

TAs has been found to have different roles and employment procedures across the 3 selected countries. To begin with, TAs are recruited based on subject knowledge, previous experience, and language proficiency in US, whereas in UK there is no systematic process for recruitment; Australia has a general lack of formal policy and procedure when it comes to TAs or what they refer to as casual academic. In terms of training, in US, training consists of a voluntary orientation and induction training and mentoring programs and courses on college teaching whereas in UK training is also recommended but not mandatory but has been found to be ineffective; Australian TAs have only induction training which focuses on policies and procedures generally. The main role of TAs in US is to reduce teaching loads but also to provide teaching experience and funds for students, which is like UK, except they have no control over academic material in UK. Australian TAs are responsible for up to 50% of the teaching. Overall, in terms of self-efficacy and feedback, Australia and UK's TAs have no formal mechanisms of receiving feedback whereas in US they can receive feedback through students, self-evaluation, and in-class assessments.

2.5   TA employment in the Gulf cooperation council (GCC) countries

In recent years, the education sector has undergone major developments, particularly in HE institutions. Revenues from oil and gas exports enable the Gulf countries to invest more in the HE sector and provide quality teaching and learning at many colleges and universities. GCC countries have realised that the goal of moving towards a knowledge-based economy can only be achieved with an educated population. Accordingly, government spending on HE has increased, particularly on public universities. Moreover, there has been an increase in the availability of institutions, programs, and universities that focus on obtaining prestigious accreditation and forming partnerships with foreign universities (Baghdady, 2017), which has simultaneously led to the opening of prestigious international university campuses (Mukerji and Jammel, 2008).

There has been an increase in enrolment in both public and private universities. Moreover, a number of educational projects have been opened, such as Education City in Qatar, which includes campuses of several internationally recognised universities that provide various undergraduate and postgraduate programs (Shah, 2017). This increased development in the HE sector and the willingness to achieve quality standards in teaching and learning emphasise the need to employ faculty members and TAs to help ensure progress towards the educational goals. However, GCC countries rely heavily on expatriate faculty rather than local faculty (Shah, 2017).

The employment of TAs who assist in teaching undergraduate students at colleges and universities in the region is of particular importance. TAs in the Gulf region are used to prepare graduate students to become academics. The opportunity to work as a TA is usually provided to nationals in the country to encourage them to pursue careers in

academia. Research on the employment processes of TAs in the GCC region is lacking. Thus, this study focused on the well-recognised HE institution, Qatar University (QU), to explain the employment process for TAs within the region.

2.6 Qatar university: a case study

QU was the first national university in Qatar (Qatar University, 2022). It has 10 colleges and provides 84 academic programs. It has more than 1000 faculty members of 67 nationalities. QU's population is made up of more than 23,000 students and over 3100 full-time staff members (Qatar University, 2022). QU focuses on its critical purpose, which is to lead both economic and social development through successful partnerships both within Qatar and internationally (Qatar University, 2022).

QU is internationally recognised for providing high-quality education to undergraduate and postgraduate students. For example, it was ranked 36 on the 'QS Top 50 Universities under 50 Years' list in 2019. Therefore, QU has hired many TAs as it continues to expand. TAs are defined as academic staff who must possess a bachelor's degree, and their main role is supporting the faculty in undergraduate teaching (Qatar University, 2013).

TA employment has been on the rise at Qatar University. Since 2015, there has been a steady increase from 226 TAs to 248 of full-time teaching assistants in 2022. There are two categories of TAs at QU: nationals and non-nationals. Nationals represent the majority of TAs at the university. This study explored the employment experiences of national (Qatari) TAs at QU.

2.7 Research gap

Although staff turnover is an important issue in academia, there has been a lack of exploration of HRM procedures and their role in turnover, particularly for TAs. Generally, there is a huge gap in the research regarding TAs. In particular, it has been difficult because there is no definition of 'teaching assistants' as per the Ministry of Higher Education in Qatar; therefore, the definition utilised by QU had to be used since it is a national university.

Findings on various sectors and industries such as manufacturing and services cannot be applied to the HE sector because of differences in occupational roles and demographics (Batt, 2002). As the intention to leave is vital among TAs in HE, this area requires additional attention. The current study examined a set of hypothesised relationships between employment practices for graduate TAs and their intention to leave, particularly with respect to the different cultural aspects of Qatar, where there are differences between nationals and non-nationals.

2.8 Proposed conceptual model and research hypotheses

2.8.1 Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory provides valuable insights into the dynamics between teaching assistants (TAs) and universities. According to this theory, individuals engage in social exchanges with organisations, aiming to maximise the benefits they receive in return for their contributions (Blau, 1964). As per Wagar et al. (2011), the impact of effective HRM

practices can indirectly affect organisational performance by influencing employee satisfaction and operational efficiency.

For teaching assistants in universities, this exchange involves providing their expertise and support in assisting professors with teaching and administrative tasks in exchange for various rewards and resources from the institution. These rewards may include financial compensation, professional development opportunities, and the chance to gain valuable experience in academia (Blau, 1964).

In the context of social exchange theory, the relationship between TAs and universities becomes reciprocal. When universities offer adequate support, fair compensation, and recognition for their efforts, TAs are more likely to feel valued and motivated to invest in their roles, leading to higher job satisfaction and commitment to the university (Shore and Shore, 1995). Conversely, if TAs perceive an imbalance in the exchange, such as inadequate support or low compensation, it may lead to dissatisfaction and, eventually, an increased intention to leave their position (Liu and Piening, 2018).

Therefore, universities can effectively manage their teaching assistant workforce by employing the principles of social exchange theory. By providing TAs with a positive work environment, opportunities for professional growth, and fair rewards for their contributions, universities can foster a mutually beneficial relationship that enhances the quality of education and contributes to the overall success of both TAs and the institution. Understanding and applying social exchange theory can help universities create a supportive and rewarding environment for their teaching assistants, leading to increased job satisfaction, and reduced turnover intention among this critical group of academic support staff.

2.9   Hypotheses

One of the most significant developments in this field has been the increasing importance given to human capital. Human resources, including TAs, are vital to universities as they offer talents, values, and attributes, and when managed effectively, this human capital can be of considerable benefit to the accomplishment of a university's teaching and learning goals. In general, effective human resource management (HRM) practices can result in improved performance, both on the individual level and for the entire organisation (Obeidat et al., 2016; Huselid, 1995). Many performance indicators are used, including productivity, financial performance, turnover rates, and absence rates (Wall and Wood, 2005; Huselid, 1995). Intention to leave (behavioural intention) has been found to be a very important indicator in HE (Steel and Ovalle, 1984). The proposed study model is displayed in Figure 1, alongside the constructs' sources in Table 1.

Figure 1   Proposed study model (see online version for colours)
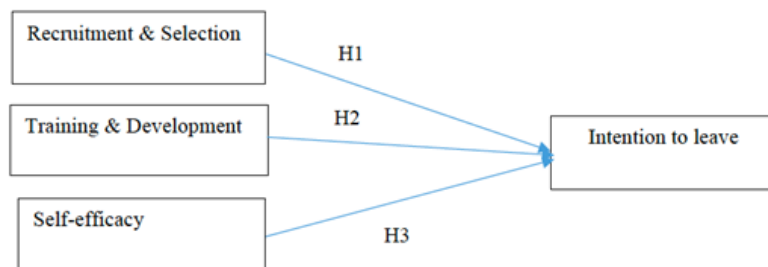
Table 1 Constructs

Construct	Source
Recruitment and selection	Kehoe and Wright (2010)
Training and development	Rahman and Nas (2013)
Self-efficacy	Ghaith and Shaaban (1999)
Intention to leave (dependent)	Steel and Ovalle (1984) and Arnold and Feldman (1982)

Effective hiring practices are particularly important for the recruitment and selection of qualified employees. Studies have shown that the failure to recruit and select the right candidate for a job can result in negative scenarios, such as low productivity (Kehoe and Wright, 2010). Effective recruitment and selection processes play a vital role in achieving lower turnover rates within organisations. When companies focus on hiring candidates whose skills, qualifications, and values align with the organisation's culture and goals, it leads to better employee-organisation fit and job satisfaction (Erdogan and Bauer, 2010). According to a study by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005), person-organisation fit positively influences employee attitudes and commitment, which in turn reduces turnover intentions. Additionally, a comprehensive and well-structured selection process that includes thorough interviews, relevant assessments, and reference checks helps identify candidates with a higher likelihood of long-term commitment to the organisation (Breaugh and Starke, 2000). Moreover, when employees perceive that the recruitment process is fair and transparent, it fosters trust in the organisation and strengthens their intent to stay (Cable and Turban, 2001). When TAs are poorly selected for academic positions within a university, they may exhibit negative attitudes towards their jobs, which may ultimately lead to the intention to quit. Thus, investing in effective recruitment and selection practices can significantly contribute to lower turnover rates and enhance overall organisational stability and performance.

Another important HR practice that may influence TAs' intention to leave is T&D. Memon et al. (2016) emphasised that effective training and development can elevate work engagement levels, thereby improving employee retention. To enhance employee retention, it is advisable to combine training with fair compensation and a performance appraisal system, as suggested by Shafique et al. (2018). Implementing a well-structured career development program, which considers both the employee's professional growth and the organisation's success, results in increased workplace satisfaction and ultimately reduces employee turnover intention. Previous studies have shown a negative link between effective T&D programs and employees' intention to leave (Khoo et al., 2017; Luna-Arocas and Camps, 2008). When TAs perceive that their universities provide effective T&D programs, they are less likely to think of leaving their current job because these investments make the job more attractive (Guchait and Cho, 2010; Rahman and Nas, 2013). Accordingly, we hypothesised the following:

H1: Effective recruitment and selection practices for TAs have a significant negative relationship with their intention to leave.

H2: Effective T&D of TAs has a significant negative relationship with their intention to leave.

Another important factor that predicts TAs' intentions to leave is self-efficacy, in which educators with lower levels of self-efficacy face more issues than those with higher self-

efficacy. Bandura (1997) found that an individual's perception of their own abilities affects how they take on a task and shapes their behaviour. Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to perform specific tasks or roles, plays a crucial role in reducing turnover rates within organisations. Research has consistently shown that employees with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to approach challenges with confidence and perseverance, leading to better job performance and job satisfaction (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998; Stajkovic and Lee, 2002). This increased confidence in their abilities can contribute to greater commitment to their work and the organisation, as individuals are more likely to see themselves as valuable contributors to the overall success of the company (Chen et al., 2018). Additionally, employees with higher self-efficacy are better equipped to handle stress and overcome obstacles, reducing the likelihood of burnout and turnover (Chen et al., 2018; Gist and Mitchell, 1992). By nurturing self-efficacy through training, support, and positive feedback, organisations can create a more resilient and dedicated workforce, ultimately leading to lower turnover rates and increased organisational stability.

Consequently, TAs may be more likely to think of leaving their jobs if they believe they do not have the necessary abilities to teach effectively. Based on this, the following hypothesis was developed:

H3: Self-efficacy of TAs has a significant negative relationship with their intention to leave.

3   Methodology

This study was conducted in two phases. Phase one was based on a focus group with several TAs who aimed to explore the employment process based on the TA experience. A questionnaire was developed based on the data gathered from the focus group. The questionnaire items aimed to gather employment experiences but were customised to the TA employment process based on the data gathered in the first phase. They were pilot tested with TAs to ensure that all items were relevant and clear. The questionnaire was modified after the pilot test.

In phase two, data were collected through a questionnaire developed during phase one. The questionnaire was distributed online to all national TAs employed at QU, with the help of the Institutional Survey Research and Analytics, Strategy, and Development Office. The survey link was sent to 166 TAs at QU. 80 responses were received, giving a response rate of 48%. The questionnaire included three employment experience dimensions.

First, the recruitment and selection constructs were measured using seven items. Second, the orientation, training, and development constructs were measured using a variety of items. Third, work conditions were measured using five items. Two items were also used to measure intention to leave; an example is '*I often think of leaving my job*'. Finally, four items were used to measure the self-efficacy of TAs; an example is '*My enthusiasm for teaching will make me an effective instructor*'. All items are listed in Table 3.

3.1   Background information

The respondents' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 2. Most respondents were female (62.5%). This was expected and is representative of the study population, since females dominate the education, and HE sectors in Qatar. Moreover, most respondents were 25–34 years in age (70%). Approximately 35% of the respondents had less than two years of experience at QU. Respondents were equally distributed in terms of their status, as follows: about 28.7% were TAs and were about to pursue their master's degree, 37.5% had a master's degree and were about to pursue their PhD, and 33.8% were currently pursuing their doctoral studies.

A large percentage of the respondents belonged to the School of Arts and Sciences (39.7%), followed by the School of Business (28.2%), College of Shariaa (7.7%), and College of Engineering (7.7%). The remaining respondents belonged to other colleges (e.g., education, law, pharmaceuticals, etc.).

Table 2   Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Gender	Percentage	Count	Work experience at QU	Percentage	Count
Male	37.5%	30	<2 years	35%	28
Female	62.5%	50	2–5 years	41.3%	33
Age group	*Percentage*	*Count*	More than 5 years	23.8%	19
Below 25 years	13.8%	11	*Current status*	*Percentage*	*Count*
Between 25 and 34 years	70%	56	TA and about to pursue master's degree	28.7	23
Between 35 and 44 years	8.8%	7	Hold a master's degree and about to pursue PhD	37.5	30
More than 44 years	7.5%	6	Currently pursuing PhD study	33.8	27

4   Analysis of the results

4.1   Recruitment and selection practices

In terms of the recruitment process, more than half of the respondents mentioned that they heard about TA jobs from QU faculty members, followed by a relative/friend working at QU (28.1%), university websites (13.5%), and employment ads (6.7%). Moreover, less than half of the respondents mentioned that the head of the department was the focal point of the hiring process (44.8%), followed by college deans (18%).

In terms of the hiring process, some respondents said that they went through a formal hiring process that included the following: 35.7% filled out an application form and/or submitted a CV, 34.18% went through an initial interview, and 34.2% went through an in-depth interview. Only a few went through employment tests (e.g., a work sample). The results can be seen in Table 3. The hiring process duration for most respondents (approximately 81%) did not exceed six months.

The respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of the hiring process at QU as shown in Table 4. The results showed that the respondents agreed that the selection process was moderately effective (mean = 3.42). They agreed that the hiring process was clear to them (mean = 3.43) and that the HR department's role in the hiring process was

helpful (mean = 3.14). Moreover, they believed that the length of the hiring process was acceptable (mean = 3.2), and that QU communicated the hiring results at the end of the process (mean = 3.29).

Table 3   The formal hiring process

No.	Hiring process	Percentage (%)	Count
1	Filling out an application form (submit a CV)	35.7	70
2	Initial interview	34.18	67
3	In-depth interview	28.57	56
4	Employment tests	0.51	1
5	Others	1.02	2
Total		100%	196

Table 4   The effectiveness of the hiring process

| No.	Statement	Mean	Std. deviation	Variance
Recruitment and selection practices				
1	TA hiring process at my college are clear	3.43	1.32	1.74
2	The role of the HR department in the hiring process is helpful	3.14	1.30	1.69
3	The HR department communicated the selection results at the end of the hiring process	3.29	1.26	1.58
4	The hiring interview was conducted by trained and impartial people	4.05	1.10	1.21
Training and development practices				
1	QU invests in development and education by promoting personal and professional growth in a broad manner	3.00	1.07	1.14
2	Encouraging TAs to attend training/workshops organised by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning	2.98	1.15	1.32
3	My mentor helped a lot in the first days as a TA	3.60	1.29	1.66
4	My mentor was available to TAs and answered all questions	3.66	1.19	1.42
5	My mentor guided me in finding the right university for my graduate studies	3.42	1.31	1.72
Work conditions practices				
1	Provides own space to do the work	3.97	1.18	1.39
2	Introduces TAs to other TAs in the department	3.85	1.33	1.78
3	A chance to teach a course or more	3.89	1.08	1.16
4	A chance to serve on committees	4.10	0.98	0.95
5	A strong relationship with the other TAs in my department	3.74	1.21	1.46

4.2   Training and development

Regarding mentorship, the analysis showed that most respondents (approximately 80%) did not go through a formal induction process. Approximately 65% of the respondents stated that they had not been assigned a formal mentor after being hired at QU. Additionally, TAs were requested to judge the effectiveness of mentoring, training, and development practices for TAs at QU. The results can be seen in Table 3. Overall, the respondents were moderately satisfied with these practices (mean = 3.33). Those who had been assigned a mentor believed that their mentor helped them a lot, especially in the first days of employment (mean = 3.6).

4.3   Work conditions

TAs were asked about the type of activity which had been assigned to them when they were hired. Approximately 17% stated that they aided in teaching, 19% mentioned that they helped with proctoring, and approximately 12% said they helped with marking assessments. The remaining activities varied and included lecturing (10%), tutoring (11.4%), preparing teaching materials (8%), and leading seminars and group discussions (7%). When asked about the maximum number of classes they had taught in one semester since they joined QU, approximately 40% mentioned that they had not taught any classes since they joined QU, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2   Number of classes taught in one semester (see online version for colours)
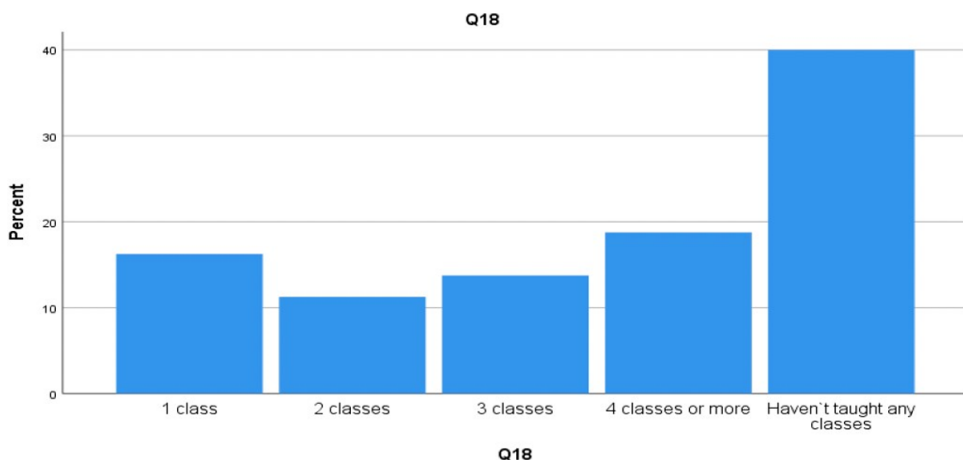
TAs' satisfaction with their work conditions at QU were also analysed. Overall, TAs agreed to a moderate level that QU provides them with proper workspaces and the opportunity to be involved in teaching as well as serving on committees. The mean was 3.91 (as shown in Table 3).

4.4   Structural equation modelling analysis

To test this model, structural equation modelling was utilised. SMART PLS was used as it is effective for causal frameworks with smaller sample sizes (Henseler et al., 2009). Both the measurement model and the structural model were assessed.

4.5   Assessing the measurement model

Figure 3 shows a graphical representation of the model. Outer loading should be above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2009), and indeed, the loadings were mainly above 0.7. Some loadings greater than 0.5 were retained because they were important in measuring the intended construct. Following the recommendation of Hair et al. (2009), factors that load above 0.5 can be accepted under certain conditions.

Figure 3   PLS graphic representation of the study model (see online version for colours)
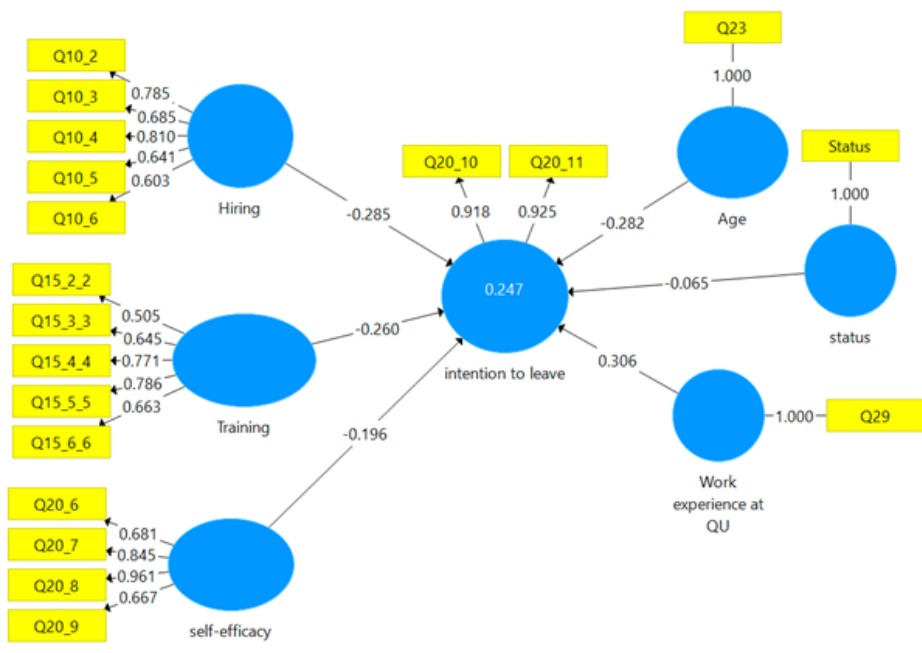
Previous research found that the CR threshold is 0.8, Cronbach's alpha is 0.7, and the average variance extracted (AVE) is 0.5 (Hair et al., 2009). With one exception, the results showed that the reliability analysis values met the following criteria: the AVE value for T&D was 0.47, which is close to the lowest allowable value. Consequently, the outer model can be declared internally consistent and reliable (Table 5). In addition, discriminant validity was assessed, which measures the extent to which a construct's measurements differ from those of other constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The loading of each indicator was used to test the discriminant validity (Chin, 1998). Each indicator's loading was larger than the sum of its cross-loadings.

Table 5 Scales' internal consistencies

Construct	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Recruitment and selection	0.50	0.83	0.78
Training and development	**0.47**	0.81	0.72
Self-efficacy	0.64	0.87	0.89
Intention to leave	0.85	0.92	0.82

According to the results shown in Table 6 (descriptive and correlation matrices), a significant correlation was found between recruitment practices and intention to leave, and a negative but insignificant correlation existed between T&D practices, self-efficacy, and intention to leave.

Table 6 Correlation matrix of the study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender (log)	1							
2. Age (log)	−0.72	1						
3. Status (log)	−0.278*	0.168	1					
4. Work experience (log)	−0.13	0.526**	0.427**	1				
5. Recruitment and selection	−0.057	−0.266*	−0.220	−0.132	1			
6. Training and development	−0.160	−0.124	−0.054	−0.170	−0.042	1		
7. Self-efficacy	0.102	−0.135	0.035	−0.056	0.181	−0.180	1	
8. Intention to leave	0.131	−0.053	0.120	0.158	−0.303**	−0.024	−0.059	1

4.6 Assessing the structural model

A structural model was used to test the hypotheses. First, the R^2 value was used to evaluate the predictive ability of the endogenous construct. Intention to depart had an R^2 value of 0.25. Based on Chin's (1998) suggestion, the R^2 values of the endogenous constructs were satisfactory. Cohen (2013) argued that f^2 values close to 0.02 imply a small effect. The f^2 values demonstrated small effects of recruitment, training, and self-efficacy on intention to leave, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Test of total effects

Path	f² Values	Coefficient	t-value	Hypothesis
H1: Recruitment and selection intention to leave	0.09	−0.285	2.585*	H1 supported
H2: Training and development intention to leave	0.08	−0.260	2.016*	H2 supported
H3: Self-efficacy intention to leave	0.05	−0.196	0.884	H3 not supported

*$p < 0.05$. $N = 80$.

4.7 *Direct effects*

Direct effects were investigated via bootstrapping to test H1, H2, and H3. These results supported H1 and H2. Recruitment and selection procedures had a strong negative relationship with intention to leave (ß = –0.285*). Furthermore, there was a significant negative association (ß = –0.260*) between T&D and intention to leave. Finally, the direct effect of self-efficacy on intention to leave was negative but minor (ß = –0.196), as shown in Table 6.

5   Discussion and conclusion

The current study aimed to provide a comparative analysis of the forms of TA employment in well-known countries recognised in the HE sector, namely USA, UK, and Australia. The analysis was based on published literature. The second aim was to explore and highlight the employment of TAs in the Gulf region, particularly in Qatar. This paper provides the results of an empirical case study conducted for this purpose.

A review of the literature showed variations and similarities in the TA employment processes in US, UK, Australia, and the GCC region. Employment practices for graduate TAs are well established in US, whereas they are under-established in other countries (such as UK and Australia). The main aim of relying on TAs seems to be similar among countries: to reduce teaching loads on permanent academic staff and to provide teaching experience for TAs to equip them for their future in academia. Within GCC countries, HE institutions provide an opportunity for nationals to work as TAs to encourage them to pursue careers in academia.

Two important themes arose from the comparison. First, HE institutions among the examined countries emphasise the need to follow a systematic employment process that includes effective recruitment, formal mentoring, and training for TAs, while also providing them with proper working conditions that ensure continuity in their academic careers. Second, the role of TAs seems ambiguous across countries. For example, in US, the way graduate TAs are viewed as either students or employees seems to be highly dependent on whether they are employed in state or private universities. In UK, graduate TAs are considered postgraduate students employed on a part-time basis, whereas in Australia, they are considered casual academics. In the GCC region, HE institutions have hired TAs on full-time contracts. This confirms Park and Ramos's (2002) finding that TAs are considered important contributors to undergraduate teaching, but their status remains ambiguous, as they are viewed as both teachers and students, but not fully so.

The survey results provided interesting insights into how TAs are employed in GCC countries, particularly at QU. First, the empirical study supported H1 and H2, showing a significant negative impact of effective recruitment, selection, and T&D on TAs' intention to leave, which is in line with previous research (e.g., Guchait and Cho, 2010; Boselie and van der Wiele, 2002). However, the study failed to confirm a link between TA self-efficacy and intention to leave. The results showed a negative but insignificant relationship between the two variables. This result was expected because a systematic HRM process is essential for improving performance indicators, including intention to leave.

5.1 Implications

This study has several theoretical and practical implications. In terms of the theoretical implications, since the current trend in well-recognised HE institutions around the world is to establish quality assurance in teaching and learning that meets the criteria set by accreditation associations (e.g., AACSB International), there is a need to establish a model of employment for TAs that helps them play their role as effective teachers. This model can be reviewed and modified at the national level to ensure consistency with institutional policies and practices. Another theoretical implication is related to the survey used in this study. While the established survey represents an initial step, there is a need to establish and validate a comprehensive survey that can be used worldwide. The survey should consider variations in employment processes around the world.

This study also has several practical implications. First, the results of the empirical study can be used to improve the current employment systems at QU and in the GCC region, if the concerned parties consider the weaknesses identified in the study. Universities must consider establishing a more systematic employment process. This ranges from formalised recruitment procedures to effective training programs that are consistent and provide supportive and sound working conditions for TAs.

Second, the evidence supported the negative effect of employment practices on TAs' intention to leave. Accordingly, it is recommended that HE institutions in the GCC region rethink their employment policy for TAs to avoid any hassles related to the high turnover rate, particularly when one of the main goals of HE institutions is encouraging nationals to enter academia. Therefore, this research elucidates what role the TA employment model in HE can play in achieving goals related to delivering quality education while providing effective experience for TAs, which is important for HE institutions in GCC countries that have undergone major developments in recent years.

5.2 Limitations and future research directions

The sample size was relatively small due to the lower number of national TAs at Qatar University, therefore generalisability is impacted. In terms of future research directions, it is important to assess the impact of a robust TA employment model on the intention to leave in a longitudinal study to determine the change over time, depending on the stages of TAs. Additionally, future research could explore TA employment within other universities in the GCC and MENA regions, compare it with Western universities, and explore the cultural aspects and differences but also explore cross-departmental differences in TA employment.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Background Information:

Are you male or female? Which age group do you belong to?

Did you have work experience before you joined Qatar University? (Y/N) What college you are working in? What Department?

What is your current status?

- I am a TA and just finished my bachelor's degree from Qatar university.
- I am a TA and just joined QU after my master's degree.
- I hold my master's degree and I just joined QU university.
- I'm now pursuing my PhD (doctorate) study.

If you joined QU as a TA after you finish your Bachelor/master's degree, where did you finish your study?

- At Qatar University
- Inside Qatar (but from different university)
- Outside Qatar, please specify which country _____.

Recruitment and Selection

How did you hear about TA jobs in QU? (Click all that apply)

- University/Career Websites
- Recommendation from a faculty member (one of your professors)
- Recommendation from a relative/friend working at QU.
- Employment Advertising for TA jobs

Who was the focal point during the hiring process?

- Head of department
- College Dean
- The hiring committee
- Administrative assistance at the department/college
- Others (please specify) _____

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1 TA should be given the chance to teach a course or more.

2 The department should be in charge of the hiring decision of TA's.

3 TA hiring process at my college is very clear.

4   The role of HR Department in the hiring process is helpful.

5   The first step in the hiring process was known to me.

6   The university discloses information to applicants regarding the steps and criteria of the hiring process.

7   The university communicate the selection results at the end of the hiring process.

8   The hiring interview are conducted by trained and impartial people.

9   The university uses various selection instruments such as interviews, tests, etc...

10 The length of the TA hiring process at QU is acceptable.

11 New TAs need to be introduced to the culture and policies of the department, college, and the whole university.

12 My college/department provide me with professional development opportunities (training and workshops)

13 QU helps me develop the skills I need for the successful accomplishments for my duties.

14 QU invest in my development and education promoting personal and professional growth in abroad manner (e.g., scholarship, language course, conferences etc.)

15 QU treats me with respect and attention.

16 QU is concern with my wellbeing.

17 In the department I work for, there is an environment of understanding and confidence between faculty members.

18 The department I work for recognises the work I do and the results I achieve.

19 The department I work encourages my participation in decision making and problem solving.

20 In the department I work for, there is an environment of trust and cooperation.

21 The department I work for encourages social interaction (e.g., non-work-related activities) among staff.

22 The department I work for encourages attending training/ workshop organised by Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (formally OFID)

23 The facilities and physical condition (lighting, noise, temperature) in QU are comfortable and appropriate.

24 My department provides me with my own space to do my work.

25 When I start working, my department chair has introduced me to other TAs at the department.

Have you gone through a formal interview with the following: (Tick all that apply)?

- selection committee (faculty from the department)
- department chair

- college dean

- vice president of the University

- president of the University

Please specify tick any one of the following methods that you went through during the hiring process:

- Filling out an application form (submit you C.V)

- Initial interview

- In-depth interview

- Employment tests

- Others (please specify) _____.

How long does the hiring process take?

- Less than one month

- From one to three months

- From three to six months

- six months to nine months

- More than nine months

Have you gone through a formal induction process (induction aims to introduce TAs with the culture, standards, and procedures of the department, college, and the whole university)? (Y/N)

After you were hired, Have you been assigned a formal mentor? (Y/N)

If yes, please indicate wither you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1   My mentor helped me a lot in my first days as TA.

2   My mentor was available for me and answered all my questions.

3   My mentor guided me in finding the right university for my graduate studies.

4   Having a senior faculty as mentor is important for the new TA.

Have you worked before as an undergraduate TA during your undergraduate study? (Background) (Y/N)

After being hired as a TA, what type of tasks/roles are being assigned to you?

- Aiding in teaching for faculty members

- Lecturing (you have been assigned course or more to teach by yourself)

- Tutoring

- Lab / fieldwork

- Marking assessments

- Help in proctoring.

- Preparing teaching materials

- Leading seminars and group discussions

- Others (please specify) _____.

Have you heard about the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (formally OFID)? (Y/N)