

GUIDELINES FOR THE APPOINTMENT OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS AND DEMONSTRATORS IN THE SCHOOL OF LIFE SCIENCES

List of abbreviations used in the document:

AL: TL	Academic Leader: Teaching and Learning
CAES	College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science
DC	Demonstrator Coordinator (proposed)
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
PG	postgraduate
SLS	School of Life Sciences
SOM	School Operations Manager
TA	Teaching Assistant ¹

Preamble

The last working document approved by the structures of the School (of Biological and Conservation Sciences) is dated 2011. Current procedures bear some resemblance to this document, but there are differences across clusters of the School of Life Sciences.

In general, academic programmes are still proceeding successfully, with appropriate support from our demonstrators and teaching assistants (TAs). As the School's postgraduate student numbers increase, there is more intense competition for a limited number of positions. In this changing situation, our School processes and procedures must be applied consistently, with appropriate transparency, in order to maintain the integrity of the appointment procedure.

After a brief discussion across clusters in SLS, it became apparent that although expectations of demonstrators are similar, TAs are utilized very differently. Our expectations of TAs should be defined and implemented with greater consistency across clusters and modules.

Selection of demonstrators and TAs is generally the prerogative of the module coordinator. However, this lack of centralization² has resulted in students being appointed in more positions than research supervisors are comfortable with, or is considered fair and equitable. The proposed guidelines are recommended to replace the 2011 document to allow for consistency across the School. Also attached is the MoU detailing the expectations from the appointed TAs and Demonstrators for the signature of both the appointee and the module coordinator.

¹ Teaching Assistants are graduate students, employed on temporary contract by SLS to assist the Module Coordinator in providing teaching support in a specific module.

² An administrative staff member, designated as Demonstrator Coordinator (DC) will be assigned to each academic cluster as central contact point for TA/Demonstrator appointment coordination.

1 Criteria for appointment of TAs and demonstrators

The principles upon which we base our selection criteria should be discussed, agreed upon, and implemented consistently. These principles should reflect the ethos of the institution and the constitution.

1.1 The candidates

At a practical level, the following criteria should be considered for demonstrators and TAs:

- Applicants must be academically strong.
- Applicants must have done the module or its equivalent before.
- MSc and PhD students must be on track with their degrees to be eligible for demonstrating or TA appointment. Supervisors can be requested for names of any students that they want to be excluded from appointment in a particular semester.
- Junior PG students (Hons, 1st year MSc) are preferred for level 1 modules.
- More experienced PG students are preferred for the level 3 modules.
- Applicants should be able to relate to students, and have adequate communication skills to facilitate learning.
- TA or demonstrator position may not be held for more than 3 years for the same module.
- Previous performance in the module in question may be taken into consideration.

Additionally, TAs should;

- Preferably be in the second year of MSc or busy with a PhD
- Must have demonstrated in the module or its equivalent before.

1.2 The modules

Current appointment ratios appear adequate:

- 1 demonstrator per 15 students
- 1 TA per 90 students.

Motivations are considered by the AL: TL, in consultation with SOM, for deviations from this. There are module-specific issues of infrastructure limitation, or health and safety concerns, which may require a higher demonstrator / student ratio.

1.3 Rates and hours of appointment

Demonstrators and TAs are appointed at hourly rates as per University guidelines for each qualification level. These hourly rates are adjusted annually and are consequently not included in this document.

The number of practicals demonstrators and TAs are appointed for are determined by the module structure and notional hours allocated in the CAES handbook.

The number of hours per practical are determined by the associated expectations, e.g. preparation, demonstration, invigilation, assessment and/or mark administration. As a guideline, TAs should be able to complete these requirements in 7 h and demonstrators in 4.5 h per practical. However, the School reserves the right to decide on the number of hours and practical sessions to be allocated to a TA or demonstrator and make necessary adjustment during the course of the semester depending on the module requirements.

2 Procedures for applications and selection of TAs and demonstrators

The application process will be centralized and coordinated by an administrative staff, designated as the Demonstrator Coordinator (DC) for each cluster in the School, who will have access to the Student Management System and can centrally determine student numbers and consequently demonstrator and TA numbers per module.

The procedures shall include the following:

- Advertising, ahead of the start of each semester, the time when applications can be submitted for consideration. This notice should include the list of modules that can be applied for.
- Collation of the applications after the deadline.
- Maintenance of a central database of applications.
- Initial verification as per 1.1.
- Consulting with each module coordinator on a) demonstrator requirements, if different from 1.2, and b) demonstrator tasks, and consequent hours of appointment as per 1.3.
- Selection of TAs and demonstrators by the Module Coordinator.
- Communication of appointment decision by the administrative staff, under signature of the SOM. This recommendation is aimed at enforcing that demonstrators and TAs are appointed by the School, although their daily activities are managed by module coordinators.
- Completion of appointment forms by appointees, submission to administrative staff, and signing off by SOM.

Applicant shall be required to complete an application form (manual or online) to provide specific information, including: Name; student number (for assessing performance, module pre-requisites); highest / current qualification (for determining hourly rate); years registered for current qualification (for determining progress); modules applying for, in order of preference (for preferential allocation); position applying for (TA or demonstrator or either); previous experience 1) as TA or demonstrator and 2) in which module/s (this is needed initially – eventually the perpetual database should inform this automatically; field should be narrative to accommodate non-UKZN students); days available (Mon-Fri); other financial support: bursary holder (yes/no, funder – for determining hourly constraints on additional employment) or self-funded (for prioritization of needy students).

3 Equitable appointment of TAs and demonstrators

In addition to the criteria listed under 1.1, there should be constraints that can only be administered centrally by the DC.

Although SLS requires the contributions of PGs to maintain excellence in our teaching and learning mandate, this cannot result in impeded progress of PG studies. These criteria should be discussed with due sensitivity to the applicant's financial needs, balanced by considerations of the requirements of the supervisor and the constraints of the project that the student is contributing to.

Hours of appointment will be guided by the following:

- Recommended limitations: 2 demonstrator positions / semester OR 1 TA position per semester.³
- Stipulations by the bursary (or other financial support) held by the student.
- Stipulations from supervisors on appointments of specific PG student (depending on research progress).
- Hons students (who generally cannot get bursaries or other financial support) and those with financial need may be prioritized for appointment subject to meeting the criteria in section 1.1.

³ Some clusters require large numbers of demonstrators – this guideline may be reconsidered in consultation with AL: TL.

4 Processes for evaluating TAs and demonstrator performance

Demonstrators and TAs are appointed as the interface between the School and the UG student. As such a high level of performance is required to maintain the integrity and professionalism of our teaching and learning mandate.

TA and demonstrator duties (see 5 below) span technical, academic, practical, teaching and learning, assessment and administrative activities. Non-performance in any of these aspects severely impact on the perceived excellence and professionalism of SLS. Consequently we have a responsibility to our UG students to appoint the best demonstrators and TAs possible.

Demonstrators should be assessed regularly by the lecturer in charge of the practical.

- The first responsibility to communicate with and correct problematic demonstrators resides with the lecturer in charge. Problem areas must be communicated clearly, and opportunity provided for correcting problems.
- Failure to improve must be escalated firstly to the module coordinator and finally to the DC for warnings, adjusting payment or dismissal.
- Two warnings for minor offences would result in dismissal.
- Immediate dismissal should be used e.g. for not attending a practical session without prior notice or getting a replacement person or racial / sexist / abusive behaviour.
- These disciplinary decisions should be centrally maintained by the DC in consultation with AL: TL.
- After dismissal, a demonstrator may not be re-appointed for one semester.

Replacement demonstrators should be selected by the DC, in consultation with the module coordinator, using the central database.

5 Proposed job descriptions of TAs and Demonstrators

TAs and demonstrators are required to facilitate teaching and learning on behalf of the School. Consequently the School has a responsibility to train its representatives. TAs and demonstrators will be required to sign an MoU or Service Contract (see Appendix A and B) upon acceptance of the appointment offer.

5.1 Teaching Assistants

TA responsibilities vary according to the requirements of specific modules and may include, but are not limited to: tutoring; student consultations; invigilating tests or exams; teaching students in laboratory, revision or discussion sessions; assessing student work; moderating assessments by demonstrators; administrative assistance in collating, checking and maintaining marks.

5.2 Demonstrators

Demonstrators are primarily required to: facilitate practical skills and learning with a small group of students during practical sessions; manage attendance registers; assess student work and maintain student marks.

Appendix A – Memorandum of Understanding for Demonstrators in the School of Life Sciences

Congratulations - you have been selected as a demonstrator for practicals in the School of Life Sciences. Whilst this will hopefully prove to be a rewarding, enjoyable and fulfilling experience, it is by no means easy, and you will be expected to work hard, and take your position seriously.

As a demonstrator, you are expected to observe the following guidelines. In recognition of your contribution, the School undertakes to pay you a salary at the prevailing University rate.

1. Pre-Practicals

- All demonstrators must attend a pre-practical **every week** at the time arranged for the particular module(s) to prepare for the week's practical/s.
- You will be expected to sign a register at the pre-practical. If you have a **valid** reason as to why you cannot attend, please inform the Module Coordinator **before** the scheduled pre-practical.
- Even if you have been excused from the pre-practical, you may not be able to claim for the half an hour allocated for this purpose.
- These pre-practicals are designed to familiarise you with the basic requirements of the practical, such as tasks to be completed, skills to be developed, and marking criteria. Materials will be provided at these sessions for this purpose. It is your responsibility to take full advantage of this preparation time, although it is likely that additional preparation will be required outside this formal time.
- **Any unexplained absence from any pre-practical means a lack of preparation for the practical and compromises your position as a demonstrator.**

2. Attendance at practicals

Essentially, you have committed yourself to attend every practical scheduled for the student group to which you have been assigned.

- You have to be present at least 15 minutes before the start of the practical session
- The timetable provided in the notes will be adhered to.
- At the onset of the semester you will know when you are required to demonstrate, and you are obligated to attend all practical sessions to which you have been assigned.
- Should you not be able to honour this obligation for any valid reason, you are required to find a suitable replacement at least two days before the relevant practical. The replacement may only be a demonstrator who is already employed to demonstrate the same module, and has already attended the pre-practical (only applicable to modules that run practicals on more than one day).
- Valid reasons include illness, unscheduled personal course requirements, unexpected fieldwork or attendance at a conference. It is assumed that you will have an accurate idea of your other commitments prior to accepting a position as demonstrator.
- You must notify both the TA and the Module Coordinator in writing (email).
- It is the lecturer/Module Coordinator's prerogative to accept your replacement or not. Should they not be happy with the exchange, you are expected to find a more suitable replacement.
- It is your responsibility to ensure that you reimburse your replacement.
- Your replacement must not claim for the practical him/herself.
- Any failure to attend a practical without two days' notification, or to organise a suitable replacement will compromise your position as a demonstrator.

3. Laboratory protocol

You are expected to comply with all regulations concerning laboratory protocol as specified by the University, and required by law.

- Laboratory coats must be worn in all laboratories for the duration of a practical.
- Protective foot covering must be worn at all times – no open-toed shoes will be permitted in the labs.
- No eating, drinking or smoking is allowed in the laboratories.
- As a senior student you will be expected to set the example of laboratory use and etiquette to the undergraduate students.
- Every individual is responsible for safety issues as demanded by the Occupation Health and Safety Act of 1993.
- Microscopes, microscope slides, glassware and micrographs are precious commodities. Teach students to be responsible for them. No slide, micrograph or any piece of equipment may be removed from the laboratory. Microscopes must be put away into their lockers with the objective on low power. Microscopes are not to be shifted around the laboratory to other lockers. All slides are to be returned to their trays. All glassware used must be washed before students leave. If a microscope or glassware is broken, report it to the laboratory technician.
- If you are responsible for a laboratory, please lock all windows, switch lights off and lock the door when the practical session is finished.
- Any breach of this laboratory protocol will compromise your position as a demonstrator.

4. Punctuality and time-keeping

- You are expected to arrive at least 15 minutes before a practical is to start.
- You are expected to be present in the laboratory for the full duration of the practical.
- Failure to comply with the above will compromise your position as a demonstrator.

5. Marking

- You must have completed marking the practical books assigned to you before you arrive at the next practical. No marking of a previous practical shall be permitted during the next practical.
- No one, other than yourself, may mark the books that have been assigned to you.
- Make meaningful and constructive comments that could assist the students on the scripts.
- To ensure consistency across demonstrators, you must adhere to the marking scheme provided.
- You must keep an accurate, up-to-date record of your students' marks on the mark sheets provided.
- You must hand in these marks to the TA weekly.
- Failure to produce an accurate set of marks timeously will compromise your position as a demonstrator.

Should you fail to fulfil your obligations as outlined above, your position as a demonstrator may be terminated at the discretion of the Module Coordinator, with the approval of AL: TL.

6. Other guidelines

- Try not to answer a question directly, but, in line with a constructive teaching philosophy, adopt a guided-enquiry approach to queries.
- Remember, we are not teaching primarily for content, but for skills development and meaningful understanding of scientific concepts.
- Be pro-active in your dealings with students. Do not sit on the side benches but wander around the students even if they are not requesting help.
- Please try to be sympathetic to the needs (and feelings) of the students.

- Please write meaningful comments when marking and try to refer students back to these at each new practical. This formative assessment is vital in the development of the students.
- You have a responsibility to bring to the attention of the Teaching Assistant, lecturer in charge and/or Module Coordinator any student who may be struggling.
- Please encourage the use of English in class. English is the Universal language of scientific discourse and the official medium of instruction at this University.
- ALL students demonstrating for the first time are expected to attend a compulsory Demonstrator training workshop normally scheduled at the beginning of the semester. Failure to attend this training/workshop will compromise your position as a demonstrator.

7. Payment

- You will be paid at the prevailing University rate of pay for the level of student that you are (i.e. Hons, MSc etc.).
- You must FULLY complete the relevant appointment form and submit to the admin office before the start of term, together with ALL accompanying documents (study visa etc.), any errors or missing information will delay payment for a month.
- Your appointment will be from the month in which semester commences to the end of the semester.
- The School reserves the right to decide on the number of hours and practical sessions to be allocated to a demonstrator and make necessary adjustment during the course of the semester depending on the module requirements.

 Demonstrator signature

 Date

 Signature of the module coordinator

 Date

Appendix B – Memorandum of Understanding for Teaching Assistants in the School of Life Sciences

Congratulations - you have been selected as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in the School of Life Sciences. Whilst this will hopefully prove to be a rewarding, enjoyable and fulfilling experience, it is by no means easy, and you will be expected to work hard, and take your position seriously.

As a TA, you are expected to observe the following guidelines. In recognition of your contribution, the School undertakes to pay you a salary at the prevailing University rate.

1. Pre-Practicals

- You are expected to assist with the pre-practical every week. This entails liaising with the module coordinator, lecturer and laboratory technician to ensure that the laboratory, practical material and demonstrators are adequately prepared to assist learning in the practical.
- Maintain a register at the pre-practical to ensure all demonstrators attend.
- Pre-practicals are designed to familiarise demonstrators with the basic requirements of the practical, such as tasks to be completed, skills to be developed, and marking criteria. The lecturer will prepare materials for these sessions.

2. Attendance at practicals

- Essentially, you have committed yourself to run every practical for the module to which you have been assigned (Applicable to modules where practicals are run concurrently in different laboratories).

3. Laboratory protocol

You are expected to comply with all regulations concerning laboratory protocol as specified by the University, and required by law, and to ensure that demonstrators in your lab complies.

- Laboratory coats must be worn in all laboratories for the duration of a practical.
- Protective foot covering must be worn at all times – no open-toed shoes will be permitted in the labs.
- No eating, drinking or smoking is allowed in the laboratories.
- You are expected to set the example of laboratory use and etiquette to the demonstrators and undergraduate students.
- You are expected to ensure that all safety issues as demanded by the Occupation Health and Safety Act of 1993 are strictly adhered to at all times by the students.
- Teach, and oversee, students to be responsible for microscopes, slides and other biological material. Report breakages to the laboratory technician.
- Close / lock all windows, switch lights off and lock the door when the practical session is finished. Ensure that you consult with the technical staff regarding arrangements for the keys.

4. Punctuality and time-keeping

- You are expected to arrive at least 15 minutes before a practical is to start.
- You are expected to be present in the laboratory for the full duration of the practical.
- Ensure that practical books are collected and distributed as required.

5. Marking

- You must ensure that marking model answers are distributed to demonstrators / markers, expectations clarified, and model answers returned to you.
- Ensure that demonstrators / markers make meaningful and constructive comments on the scripts.
- To ensure consistency across demonstrators, you are expected to moderate a subset of practical books every week.
- Ensure that demonstrators keep accurate, up-to-date records of student marks on the mark sheets provided.
- Marks must be collated and entered weekly according to the agreed deadline.

6. Other guidelines and responsibilities

- Try not to answer a question directly, but, in line with a constructive teaching philosophy, adopt a guided-enquiry approach to queries.
- Remember, we are not teaching primarily for content, but for skills development and meaningful understanding of scientific concepts.
- Be pro-active in your dealings with students.
- You have a responsibility to bring to the attention of the lecturer / Module Coordinator any student who may be struggling.
- Assisting the administrative staff in mark (practicals and tests) collation, verification and entering.
- Invigilation and administration of theory and practical tests (If required).
- Assistance with assessment of practical and theory tests (if required).
- Guide struggling demonstrators, escalate issues with troublesome demonstrators to the lecturer / module coordinator.
- Other duties that may be assigned to you by the module coordinator, including but not limited to: tutorial sessions, consultation sessions with students, and revision/discussion sessions.

Should you fail to fulfil your obligations as outlined above, your position as a TA may be terminated at the discretion of the Module Coordinator, with the approval of AL: TL.

7. Payment

- You will be paid at the prevailing University rate of pay for your level (MSc, PhD).
- You must FULLY complete the relevant appointment form and submit to the admin office before the start of term, together with ALL accompanying documents (study visa etc.), any errors or missing information will delay payment.
- Your appointment will be from the month in which semester commences to the end of the semester.
- The School reserves the right to decide on the number of hours and practical sessions to be allocated to a TA and make necessary adjustment during the course of the semester depending on the module requirements.

Signature of the Teaching Assistant

Date

Signature of the module coordinator

Date