

# THE INVISIBLE ACADEMICS

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## ABSTRACT

Education focused academics are not considered to be “teaching only” but also do not fit the traditional “research and teaching” classification, falling somewhere in between with a typical workload of 80% teaching and 20% research. There is a lack of reliable data on the numbers and demographics of education focused academics in Australian universities; our own experience suggests a majority are female and clustered in lower level academic positions that may be fixed term. Education focused academics take on a disproportionately high teaching load, often coordinating large first year service-taught courses, mentoring casual teaching staff and acting as facilitators of student engagement. Career pathways are not well defined, and promotion beyond senior lecturer level is hampered by a lack of relevant and specific performance and promotion guidelines. The research role of education focused academics is not well supported particularly in the area of scholarship of teaching and learning, which can be seen as inferior to discipline-based research.

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## BACKGROUND

Over the past 10 years there has been consistent increase in the numbers of university academic staff reported as ‘teaching only’ to the Australian Government Department of Education (<https://www.education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2018-staff-data>). In 2008 there were 979 full-time equivalent (FTE) teaching only academics, representing 2.5% of the total academic workforce, which increased to 4,061 or 8.8% of the academic workforce in 2017 (Department of Education, 2018). When casual academic appointments are also included, teaching only academics account for 28.5% of university academic staff (Department of Education, 2018).

During 2014 the University of Newcastle (UoN) formally introduced Scholarly Teaching Fellow (STF) positions, defined as an academic staff member who is principally focused on teaching delivery and teaching-related duties, but has a minimum workload allocation of 20% research (UoN Enterprise Agreement 2014). There is no guideline or specific allocation for service or leadership. The creation of STF positions at UoN and other Australian universities was driven primarily by the NTEU with the objective of reducing the casual teaching workforce, and the intention that they would predominantly take on teaching roles previously undertaken by casual staff (Probert, 2013; UoN Enterprise Agreement, 2014). Although recently renamed as education focused academics (EFAs), these positions are still in place at UoN with an agreement to advertise a minimum of 10 such positions over a three-year period (UoN Enterprise Agreement, 2018). EFAs are not classified as ‘teaching only’ by the UoN and other Australian universities (Probert, 2013) in their reporting to the Department of Education, making them a somewhat undefined and invisible part of the academic landscape.

Due to the lack of information available about EFAs at national and institutional level, we focus on our own experience in this role within the School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy at UoN.

## EDUCATION FOCUSED ACADEMICS IN BIOMEDICAL SCIENCE

The School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy at UoN is a research-intensive school with primary responsibility for two undergraduate degree programs; Bachelor of Biomedical Sciences and Bachelor of Pharmacy (Hons). However, a major component of the School’s teaching activities involves service teaching for other health-related programs including medicine, nursing and midwifery, physiotherapy, exercise and sport science, medical radiation, nutrition and dietetics, food science and human nutrition, occupational therapy, oral health therapy, speech pathology and podiatry. Whilst the research and teaching functions of the School are primarily based at the Callaghan campus, service teaching occurs across three campuses at Callaghan, Ourimbah and Port Macquarie.

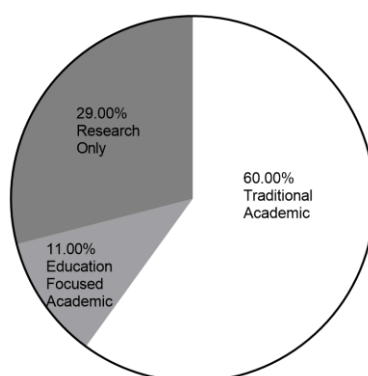
As early as 2008, there was recognition within the School that academic specialization in the form of education-focused appointments was a necessary strategy to improve the quality of undergraduate

teaching, whilst sustaining and growing international research rankings. Accordingly, all of the EFAs in the School have been appointed through competitive selection processes based on discipline specific teaching experience, performance and outcomes.

A School based Teaching Support Unit (TSU) was established around the same time to relieve academic staff of much of the administrative burden of teaching and reporting. The TSU currently has three administrative staff members and continues to support both education focused and traditional academics by managing the formatting and submission of exam papers, managing and supervising rescheduled exams, formatting course outlines and collating and uploading of student grades.

### History & Demographics of Education Focused Academics in the School

The first appointments of EFAs in the School were on one to three-year fixed term contracts. The first full time continuing EFA appointment was at level C in 2010, followed by a level B appointment in 2012 and an additional two level A appointments in 2014. There are currently 8 EFAs in the School, including four full-time continuing staff. The remaining EFAs are on short ( $\leq 1$  year) fixed term contracts. EFAs now account for 11% of the academic staff in the School (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Work function classification of academic staff in School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy at the University of Newcastle.** Traditional academics have a workload allocation of 40% teaching, 40% research, 20% service.

All EFAs in the School are female, and all but one are at level C or lower. In comparison, the traditional (40% teaching, 40% research, 20% service) academics in the School are 73% male, with most at Level D or E. Female traditional academics are spread relatively evenly across levels B, C, D and E. The imbalance between EFAs and traditional academics with respect to gender and academic level (Fig 2) means that there is a lack of professoriate leaders and role models with the specific experience and skills to share with junior EFAs.

### Role in the School

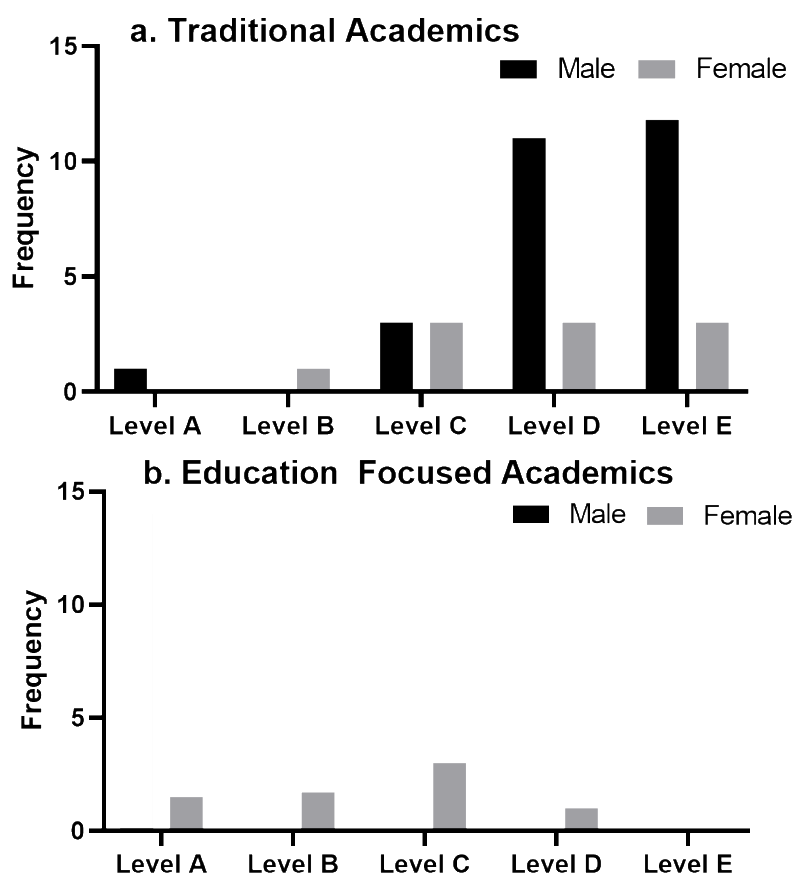
Whilst there are no specific guidelines regarding the workload allocation towards service and leadership for EFAs, the School allocates these functions from the 80% teaching and teaching related duties workload. This occurs on a case by case basis with no minimum or maximum requirements. Academic workload models tend to capture teaching duties with greater precision than research duties, and while hours are allocated for development of teaching materials in addition to teaching contact hours, staff with a higher proportion of teaching in their profile are at greater risk of being overloaded as a result of inaccurate estimates of the time taken to perform teaching duties as laid out in the workload model. This becomes more of an issue as individual student demands on staff time increase.

#### *Teaching*

EFAs fulfil a major role in face-to-face teaching and teaching-related service activities. This is particularly true for the first-year service courses for students of health professional degree programs. These courses are distinguished by their large enrolments (the seven largest courses all have enrolments in excess of 500 students). Most also have multi-campus delivery, over two or three campuses. These courses also contain multiple cohorts, some of whom may be required to attend placement activities while studying our courses, and all of whom require that science is taught in a way that is relevant to their particular health profession. The demands of delivering large service-

taught courses therefore tend to be greater due to their complexity, quite apart from the greater numbers of students.

The School relies on EFAs to coordinate and teach the majority of the content within the service courses, leaving traditional academics to focus on the smaller courses with content that is specifically within their discipline area of expertise. This strategy means that, when viewed in terms of staff: student ratios, a small number of academic staff have responsibility for a disproportionately high number of equivalent full-time students (EFTS) (Table 1). Experience has shown that the best student outcomes are achieved this way, despite the reported tendency (supported by our own observations) for students in large courses and compulsory science courses to express lower levels of satisfaction with their courses and the quality of their delivery (Koh and Tan, 1997; Feldman 1984; Wachtel, 1998; Ponder 2007).



**Figure 2: Current duties classification and gender distribution of a. traditional academics and b. EFAs in the School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy at the University of Newcastle.**

The average contribution made by EFAs to the School's course coordination (and teaching) load, measured in terms of EFTS per staff member is 90, compared to 15 for traditional academics (Table 1). The mean student satisfaction scores for their courses is slightly higher than those taught by the traditional academics, despite the expectation that students might rate their courses lower (Koh and Tan, 1997; Feldman 1984; Wachtel, 1998; Ponder 2007). In terms of workload, EFAs work within a model of 80% teaching in comparison with the 40:40:20 teaching:research:service framework for traditional academics. In view of the fact that with twice the time allotted to teaching activities, EFAs are carrying six times the EFTS load of traditional academics while maintaining higher student evaluations, it would be fair to say that they are "punching above their weight".

**Table 1: Contribution of education focused and traditional academics to coordination of courses offered in the School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy at the University of Newcastle.**

	Academic Classification		Total
	Education Focussed n=6.9	Traditional n=27	
No of Courses, n (mean)	25 (3.6)	45 (1.7)	70
EFTS Load, n (mean)	623 (90.4)	408 (15.1)	1032 (30.4)
Student Satisfaction <sup>†</sup> , median	4.2	3.9	4.0

<sup>†</sup> Student satisfaction is measured on a 0-5 scale, with a score of 5 indicative of highest satisfaction.

Numbers and metrics aside, EFAs provide additional scholarly activity and benefit to the teaching and learning environment of the School in many other ways including:

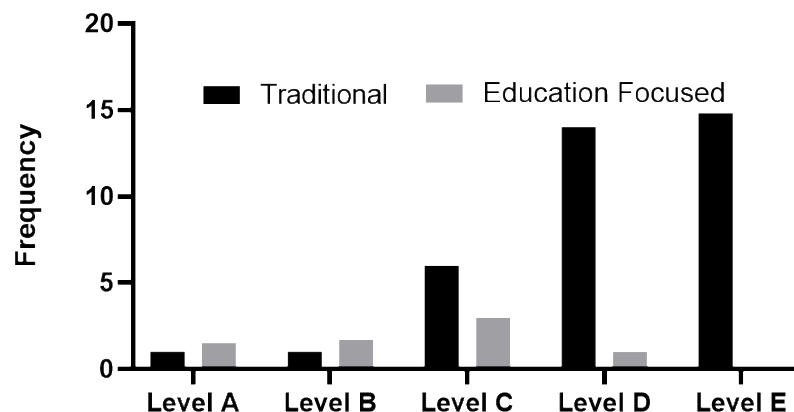
- giving of time and support to students and fellow academic staff by covering teaching workloads at short notice, mentoring junior academic and casual staff, and being available for individual interactions with students
- acting as facilitators of student engagement in learning through the development and facilitation of near peer teaching, peer assisted study sessions and other learning opportunities within our courses
- development and ongoing modification of relevant formative and summative assessments
- regular self-reflection on delivered teaching and course management that drives considered improvements and modifications

Some of these intangible contributions are difficult to measure and therefore undervalued within traditional workload models and career pathways, which is reflected in the difficulty of progressing to higher levels of academic appointment as an EFA. Despite the disproportionately high load that these staff are taking in the School's teaching activities, most (65%) are at academic levels B or C, in sharp contrast to the traditional academics, 78% of whom are at levels D or E (Figure 3). Our experience though, is that there is considerable personal value and self-satisfaction to be gained in the role of EFA, which has been reported in the literature by others undertaking these types of roles (Bennet et al 2017). The personal satisfaction in performing high quality teaching and student support may also ultimately contribute to 'job fatigue' (burnout) in these individuals, as they tend to be the most vulnerable to increases in student numbers and student need.

### *Leadership*

Leadership positions, including those in teaching and learning, such as Program Convenor and Chair of Teaching & Learning committee have until recently been filled by traditional academics, and accepting these positions has often been viewed as a means to increase the chances of a successful promotion application. The creation of a Director of Teaching and Learning role in 2013 however, signalled the start of a transfer of teaching leadership positions into the hands of EFAs. It should be noted that this occurred not as part of a deliberate strategy to transfer these positions to education-focused staff, but rather to make these appointments on the basis of relevant and proven experience in teaching and learning.

Two of the three key leadership roles in teaching and learning in the School (Program Convenor, Bachelor of Biomedical Sciences and Director of Teaching & Learning) are now filled by EFAs, with a third (Program Convenor, Bachelor of Pharmacy), occupied by a traditional academic. In addition, an EFA (Director of Teaching & Learning), is now a member of the four-person School executive, and has recently been appointed as Deputy Head of School for the first time in the history of this research-intensive School. Within the last 10 years, therefore, the School has increased the number of education-focused positions and the leadership opportunities for education-focused staff, both of which have helped to raise the visibility of these staff and give them more input to decision making in the School.



**Figure 3: Number of education-focused and traditional academic staff across academic levels.**

### *Research & Scholarly Activity*

Within the School there is a heavy emphasis towards discipline-based research (Fig 1), with few of the traditional academics engaging in scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and a large proportion (39%) of the staff employed as research fellows with no teaching commitments. There is a general perception that SoTL does not hold the same research value as discipline-based research, which is reinforced by the reality that the citation rate and impact factor of most medical journals is generally higher than most educational journals. This presents a considerable dilemma for EFAs, most of whom have a discipline specific scientific or clinical research background, who have to decide whether to continue with discipline specific research or transition to SoTL. There is a lack of clarity with respect to the research and SoTL expectations associated with the EFA role at the institutional level. At present EFAs in our School can use their 20% research allocation for discipline specific research, SoTL or a combination of both.

Whilst either SoTL or discipline-based research is acceptable, there are barriers that make it difficult for EFAs to establish a sustained research program and profile. Time is probably the most significant barrier; higher teaching hours inevitably come with more restrictions on the time available to do research. Since all EFAs are teaching and coordinating in both semesters, the opportunities to engage in research, write grant applications and travel to attend conferences are limited to the relatively small blocks of time out of semester and assessment periods. Unless they are aligned with a larger and well-funded research group, there is lack of financial support for EFAs to attend conferences. There are no funding mechanisms in place to support EFAs to attend conferences with an education focus, making it difficult to become a part of the national and international teaching focused community.

### **Career Development & Promotion**

There are no specific career scripts or performance expectations for EFAs at our institution. EFA staff receive annual metrics on their performance that feature research publications and research funding most prominently. These metrics are marked with target performance levels that apply equally to all academic staff regardless of whether they are research only, a traditional 40/40/20 academic or an EFA. The teaching metrics, which also apply to traditional academics, are cursory by contrast, consist only of student evaluations, take no account of numbers of students managed, and include rather low achievement targets. The achievements of an EFA with extremely high student evaluations and very high student numbers are not captured by any of the performance metrics used. There is also very little provision for continuing career development for education-focussed staff. Professional development in teaching and learning tends to be aimed at those who have never taught and is basic and generic. There are very few opportunities for experienced university teachers to discuss challenges and exchange ideas in university teaching.

During the promotion process, performance of EFAs is judged using same criteria as academics with a traditional 40/40/20 workload; there are also no promotion criteria specified for EFAs. The value, performance and achievements of EFAs are appreciated at the School level, which has facilitated successful promotion to levels B and C as this process is managed at the Faculty level with representation from our School. A barrier to progression arises when academics seek promotion

beyond level C; a process managed at a centralized University level by staff with no direct experience of the EFA role and no specific promotion scripts to guide their decisions. To date, no EFA at UoN has been successful in achieving promotion to Level D. Similar concerns regarding the lack of role clarity and absence of relevant and specific career and promotion scripts was also raised as an issue by teaching academics at Curtin University (Bennett et al, 2018). Although there have been efforts to define meaningful promotion criteria based on teaching (OLT 2013 Reference), they do not appear to have been widely adopted. It is clear that in the last 10 years there has been a steady rise in the number of universities creating a distinct classification for EFA's, but the information these universities supply regarding these positions rarely extends beyond a brief description of the roles and recruitment process for such staff. In very few cases is a promotion pathway described. There remain significant concerns amongst UoN academics about the opportunities for promotion and, because of this, the status of the EFA in the university community – a sentiment already noted by a number of authors (Probert 2013, Flecknoe et al. 2017, Bennett et al. 2017).

## CONCLUSION

EFAs form a collegiate group within the School of Biomedical Sciences and Pharmacy; they carry a disproportionately high teaching load, and offer a supportive community of practice for teaching-related activities including the mentoring and training of casual teaching staff. Formal acknowledgement of the education-focused role within our institution has not developed further than naming the role. Description of the role with appropriate performance standards and clear promotion criteria based on the role in its entirety, with appropriate contextual consideration of the 20% research component, is lacking.

The passion for good, innovative teaching drives most EFAs, who take a philosophical view to their 'second-class' status. But they are unanimous in their desire for the education-focused role to be treated as a legitimate role alongside the teaching and research and the research-only academic. To do this, universities must enter into a good faith effort to measure the quality of teaching performance and to reward good performance, not only through teaching awards, but in the same way good performance is rewarded in all other areas in the university – by promotion and more senior roles in the university.

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