

**Beyond Research: Exploring the Academic Identities of Education-Focused Academics
in Australia**

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Abstract

The identity of Education-Focused Academics (EFAs) remains underexplored in higher education institutions. EFAs primarily focus on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), student mentoring, and educational leadership. However, these roles often come with heavy teaching and service commitments, limiting opportunities for research engagement, conference participation, and career advancement within research-intensive institutions. In this sense, the scarce literature on EFAs highlights broader tensions in higher education, where academic identity, institutional recognition and career progression are often tied to research outputs in a “publish or perish” environment. This research will explore how EFAs shape their identities, respond to institutional expectations, and work towards greater recognition and impact within management education.

Track: Identity

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Introduction

Academic identity is shaped by the interplay of research, teaching, and service, with research and teaching traditionally holding central roles in the advancement of knowledge and the education of future professionals (Dugas et al. 2020; Shams 2019; Trautwein 2018). Higher education institutions expect academics to embrace an identity that balances these responsibilities, navigating the synergies and tensions between them (Billot 2010; Gehrke & Kezar 2015). However, in the context of research-intensive universities, institutional aspirations for global rankings have contributed to a growing emphasis on research over teaching (McCune 2021). This research-centric culture creates tension between academic roles, particularly for those whose primary focus is education rather than research.

In recent years, some universities have established Education-Focused Academic (EFA) roles, designed to elevate the teaching function and enhance learning and teaching practices (Probert 2015). Unlike their counterparts in traditional teaching-and-research positions, EFAs are primarily responsible for teaching and service, with limited research expectations or institutional support for research activities. While these roles recognise the importance of teaching, they also introduce challenges. EFAs are not only required to manage high teaching workloads but are also expected to engage in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to enhance educational practices. Despite this expectation, EFAs often struggle with a lack of institutional recognition and support for their scholarly contributions, which can negatively impact their identity and career progression (Simmons et al. 2021).

Challenges for EFAs are further exacerbated by the perception of teaching as a “Cinderella activity” in academia, where research remains the dominant aspect for career advancement (Macfarlane 2011). As a result, EFAs frequently report lower job satisfaction compared to academics in research-active roles (Coates et al. 2009) and are more likely to experience identity struggles due to the limited institutional value placed on their contributions (Skelton 2013). Given these challenges, there is a pressing need to explore EFAs identities in research-intensive universities, examining the factors that shape their professional experiences and the implications for academic careers and institutional structures. Addressing this gap is essential for fostering more inclusive academic environments where teaching excellence is valued alongside research.

This research aims to investigate the ways in which academics in education-focused roles perceive and shape their identities within research-intensive universities. Education-focused academics (EFAs) play a crucial role in universities, yet their professional trajectories and recognition often diverge from those in research balanced roles. Understanding how EFAs construct their academic identities in such contexts is essential for enhancing institutional policies and practices that support teaching excellence.

The study will also examine the challenges and conflicts that arise for EFAs in a research-intensive university. Despite the increasing institutional focus on teaching and learning, some EFAs report a sense of marginalisation due to the prevailing emphasis on research productivity. Thus, this research will explore how these dynamics affect their sense of professional self, career development and the coping mechanisms and strategies EFAs employ to address and challenge perceptions of being “second-class citizens” within academia.

Further, this research will analyse the impact of institutional initiatives, such as teaching fellowships, peer-review programs, and recognition awards, in fostering a sense of value, belonging, and legitimacy for EFAs. While these programs are intended to enhance the visibility and legitimacy of EFAs within academia, yet their effectiveness in shifting

perceptions and barriers remains an open question. By exploring these questions, this research will contribute providing insights into how EFAs sustain their professional identities and enhance their career trajectories. Therefore, the research aims to address the following questions:

1. In what ways do education-focused academics construct and define their identities in environments that predominantly value research achievements?
2. What approaches do education-focused academics employ to gain recognition and progress in their careers within research-intensive universities?
3. How do education-focused academics manage tensions between their teaching-centric responsibilities and the prevailing "publish or perish" culture in academia?
4. How do education-focused academics navigate perceptions of being positioned as "second-class citizens" compared to colleagues in balanced workload roles, and what are the implications for academic identity?

Methodology

This study will adopt a qualitative methodology (Percy et al. 2015) using an exploratory approach to investigate the experiences of EFAs across different faculties in an Australian university. In the initial stage, this research will focus on participants from a single Australian university, aiming to conduct at least 20 semi-structured interviews to capture in-depth descriptions of participants' meanings and experiences in their personal and professional journeys (Gephart Jr 2004). However, in a later stage, the study aims to expand by including participants from multiple Australian universities to provide a broader and more comprehensive perspective.

Participant recruitment and ethical considerations

Participants will be recruited through existing contacts of the lead researcher, open invitations via academic forums, communities of practice, and teaching groups. We will ensure voluntary participation and maintain ethical integrity by providing participants with a clear briefing on the research aims, scope, and ethical considerations. In line with ethical research practices, written consent will be obtained from all participants before proceeding with the recorded interviews. Anonymity will be assured by assigning pseudonyms to each interviewee during data analysis.

Data collection

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, as these platforms are widely preferred by academics due to their flexible schedules and multiple professional commitments. Given that many academics work remotely, these virtual interviews will facilitate accessibility and participation. Initial questions will be deliberately open-ended to allow participants to freely share their experiences as EFAs, followed by more focused inquiries on key aspects such as professional identity, career development, and challenges in a research-intensive university. The interviews will maintain a conversational tone to build rapport and encourage open dialogue.

Data analysis

Each interview will be analysed using NVivo 12 software. Data analysis will follow an iterative process, integrating data collection and analysis simultaneously (Gioia et al. 2013). We will employ thematic analysis to systematically identify, classify, and organise emerging themes, thereby uncovering underlying patterns and meanings in participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke 2006). This approach will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the lived

experiences of EFAs, enabling meaningful interpretations of their professional trajectories and challenges. No payments or rewards will be offered for participation; however, we will ensure that participants' confidentiality and privacy are upheld throughout the research process.

Expected contributions

This research seeks to address critical gaps in the literature on academic identities by focusing on the experiences of EFAs in research-intensive universities. While EFAs play a crucial role in student success and teaching excellence, their voices remain underrepresented in studies of academic identity. By examining their professional experiences and challenges, this research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic identity beyond the traditional research-teaching nexus.

A key contribution of this research will be the exploration of how institutional structures and policies shape the positioning of EFAs within academia. As there is prevailing emphasis on research outputs for institutional rankings and funding, this might potentially marginalise EFAs, reinforcing a culture that undervalues the SoTL and related areas of educational scholarship. This research will look into the impact of recognition and career progression pathways on EFAs. Without adequate institutional support, EFAs might experience burnout, reduced morale, and constrained career mobility, ultimately affecting the quality of education they provide.

Additionally, this study will explore how tensions and perceptions of EFAs as "second-class citizens" within academia influence relationships and collaboration between education-focused and research-active academics. Strained professional dynamics and a lack of cohesion within academic departments can hinder innovation and collective efforts to enhance higher education. By investigating these relational tensions, this research will offer practical recommendations to foster greater inclusivity and collegiality between EFAs and their peers, ultimately contributing to a more balanced and cooperative academic environment.

By addressing these issues, this research will contribute to ongoing discussions on academic identity and the evolving landscape of higher education. It will provide evidence-based recommendations to inform university policies, ensuring that EFAs receive the support, career development opportunities, and institutional recognition necessary for them to thrive and enhance the overall educational mission in higher education.

Plan to develop the paper

In preparation for the conference, I will first refine the literature review to ensure a strong theoretical foundation. This will involve incorporating recent scholarship on academic identities, particularly in the context of education-focused roles, and examining how these roles are evolving within Australian universities and overseas. This step is already in progress and will help establish the significance of the research, and ensure it contributes to ongoing academic discourse. Following this, I will conduct an initial analysis of the collected data in order to have some preliminary findings.

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