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Doing the right things right: applying Drucker's framework for education-focused roles

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ABSTRACT

Globally, education-focused academic roles have become a significant presence in the higher education workforce. Yet despite the increasing prominence, persistent challenges remain, including role ambiguity and limited career progression. In this paper, we argue that a root cause lies in the framing of these roles, where teaching is reduced to delivery, and educators are positioned more akin to manual labourers than knowledge workers. Drawing on Drucker's framework of knowledge worker productivity, which distinguishes between 'doing the right things' (identifying valuable outputs) and 'doing things right' (determining how best to do it), we analyse how education-focused roles are often governed through delivery-oriented logics. This framing helps explain why reforms focused on teaching recognition, promotion, or professional development frequently fail to produce substantive change. The paper concludes by proposing principles for reconceptualising education-focused roles as knowledge work, offering an institutionally actionable foundation for future role design, workload allocation, and career pathways.

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Introduction

Education-focused academic (EFAs) roles[1] have grown dramatically across higher education systems worldwide. In Australia, teaching-only academic positions increased by 446% between 2008 and 2022, far outpacing growth in research-focused or traditional teaching-research roles (Ross 2026). Similar patterns are evident in the United Kingdom (HESA 2023) and the United States, where contingent roles, which are often more teaching heavy, now represent over two-thirds of all faculty positions (AAUP 2025). Yet despite this expansion, the challenges facing those who occupy these roles have proved remarkably resistant to reform. Role ambiguity, limited career progression,

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and structural marginalisation continue to characterise the EFA experience (Loch et al. 2024; Ross 2026; Smith and Walker 2024), even where institutions have introduced teaching-focused promotion pathways, professional development initiatives, and formal recognition schemes (Bull et al. 2025; Ross and Scanes 2025).

A substantial body of scholarship has sought to understand why. Research on academic identities has examined how EFAs negotiate professional legitimacy within research-dominant cultures (Fleischner and Lutze-Mann 2025; Kaniadakis and Denney 2025). Studies of teaching recognition have documented persistent inequities in promotion and reward structures (Bull et al. 2025; Gretton and Raine 2017). Critical accounts of neoliberalism and performativity have traced how market logics intensify workloads and constrain professional autonomy (Kenny 2018; Olssen and Peters 2005). Collectively, these contributions have surfaced the scope and severity of the problem, and many have generated practical recommendations for institutional change. Yet a striking pattern persists as reforms targeting recognition, reward, and career structures frequently fail to produce the substantive change intended (Bull et al. 2025; Ross and Scanes 2025). If the solutions are not working, the diagnosis may be incomplete.

We contend that existing accounts, while essential, have focused primarily on the consequences of how education-focused work is positioned, for example, its low status, limited recognition, and constrained career trajectories, rather than the underlying logic through which the work itself is designed, allocated, and governed. The issue is not only that education-focused work is undervalued, but that it is conceptualised in ways that preclude the conditions under which it could be performed well. Teaching is frequently reduced to delivery. Contact hours, student numbers, and course allocations remain the dominant currencies of teaching load, while the knowledge-intensive dimensions of educational practice, including curriculum design, assessment development, and pedagogical decision-making, are rendered peripheral or invisible (Ross and Scanes 2025; Smith and Walker 2024). This framing has deep roots. Wolf and Jenkins (2020) found that the expansion of teaching-only roles in UK universities occurred largely without deliberate pedagogical strategy, shaped more by institutional expedience than educational intent. The result is a category of academic work that has expanded rapidly in volume while remaining structurally tethered to a logic of task allocation rather than professional judgement.

To bring this into sharper focus, we draw on Drucker's (1999) framework of knowledge worker productivity. Drucker's distinction between 'doing the right things' (identifying what work is valuable) and 'doing things right' (determining how best to carry it out) argues that both dimensions require the worker's own judgement and both must be present for productivity to be meaningful. Drawing on this framework, we analyse how education-focused roles are governed through delivery-oriented logics that position educators more akin to manual labourers than knowledge workers, and why reforms focused on recognition or reward alone may be insufficient. To be clear, 'manual labour' here describes the logics embedded in institutional systems of work allocation, measurement, and control, not the intrinsic skill, value, or standing of teaching itself, which is skilled, relational, and consequential work. Where existing scholarship has focused on the experience and structural causes of marginalisation, a knowledge work lens directs attention to how teaching is constituted through workload models, role

specifications, and governance arrangements. It is at this level that institutional assumptions about teaching are most consequential, yet currently the least examined. Our contribution is therefore conceptual, bringing an established theory of knowledge work into contact with the empirical literature on education-focused roles to generate a new explanation of why existing reforms underdeliver. The paper addresses two questions:

(1) How does the framing of education-focused work as delivery rather than knowledge work shape institutional systems of workload allocation, governance, and career progression?
(2) What principles of knowledge work productivity, drawn from Drucker's (1999) framework, offer an alternative basis for the design and evaluation of education-focused roles?

To address these questions, we first outline Drucker's conceptualisation of knowledge work and its core distinctions from manual labour. We then introduce his twofold productivity framework as our analytical lens. Applying this lens, we examine how education-focused roles are currently framed through a logic suited to manual labour, and the consequences this framing produces. Finally, we propose principles for reconceptualising education-focused roles as knowledge work, and discuss implications for role design, workload allocation, and career pathways.

Before proceeding, it is important to note the diversity of institutional contexts in which education-focused roles are embedded. Higher education systems are deeply stratified globally, and research-intensive and teaching-intensive universities are well documented to differ across resourcing, market position, student profile, and workload arrangements (Kenny 2018; Kenny and Fluck 2022). Notably, however, Boliver's (2015) cluster analysis of UK universities found that while institutions divided sharply on research activity, resources, and student intake, they displayed similar levels of teaching quality across this divide, suggesting that institutional standing and pedagogical investment do not straightforwardly align. How institutional type shapes the conceptualisation of education-focused roles remains largely unexamined, with existing empirical accounts drawn predominantly from research-intensive settings (Bull et al. 2025). Our contribution is therefore offered at the conceptual level, as a lens applicable across institutional contexts, while recognising that its manifestations, and the reforms it implies, will necessarily vary.

Background to the 'knowledge worker'

The term 'knowledge worker' was first introduced by Drucker (1959) to describe a category of worker whose primary contributions were no longer defined by countable outputs, but rather the application of specialised expertise. Knowledge workers, through Drucker's lens, were workers who harnessed their theoretical and analytical knowledge, acquired through education, experience, or ingenuity, to develop and improve products, services, or solutions (Drucker 1999; Todericiu and Beca 2022). The framing has since become foundational to contemporary work (Iazzolino and Laise 2018; Turriago-Hoyos, Thoene, and Arjoon 2016), though its implications for the academic workforce remain largely underexplored. While Drucker's framework

emerged from corporate and managerial contexts, its core premise applies wherever work depends on expertise, judgement, and the quality of thinking rather than the volume of output. The concept of knowledge work resonates with traditional models of academic labour, in which universities invest in the creation of collegial environments, disciplinary standards, and ongoing professional development, while the tasks of the individual are largely defined and executed by academics themselves (Becher and Trowler 2001; Drucker 1999).

The distinction between manual labourers and knowledge workers is not absolute; it is better understood as a question of which logic dominates. Many occupations logically contain elements of both; for example, Drucker (1999) uses the term 'technologists' to describe workers who combine a high level of theoretical knowledge with day-to-day manual operations. Other professions, from surgeons to laboratory technicians, to lawyers, all combine elements of both manual labour and knowledge work. In academia, this hybridity is also present, most notably in the divide between teaching and research. A lecturer may deliver a scheduled class at a fixed time and a specified location, with pre-determined content, and have an observable output measured by student numbers and retention. Yet their research time may be far more independently determined and carried out.

The challenge for EFAs is that their work is frequently treated as though it sits predominantly on the manual side of this divide, when in reality it draws on the same forms of professional judgement and expertise that characterise knowledge work more broadly. It is this dominance that shapes how teaching work is subsequently defined, allocated, and evaluated. Teaching is not just 'delivery', which implies the passing on of pre-specified, pre-packaged and consumerised content or 'student experience' (Hayes 2017; Hayes and Jandrić 2018). It encompasses the breadth of pedagogical decisions underpinning curriculum and assessment design (Godbold, Matthews, and Gannaway 2023). The persistent issues facing EFAs, including the lack of professional identity and concerns of 'invisible' workload (Ross and Scanes 2025; Smith and Walker 2024), stem from an implicit assumption that their work is largely manual. They are allocated tasks (e.g. lectures, seminars, marking), expected to follow standardised processes (prescribed unit templates, fixed assessment turnaround times, mandated moderation procedures), and judged on the basis of outputs (student enrolments, satisfaction scores, retention rates). Even the way in which they are expected to form relationships with students is often narrowed to specified 'contact hours'.

The clearest way to illustrate the distinction between manual labour and knowledge work is through how productivity is understood. For manual labour, productivity is traditionally understood as a ratio of outputs to inputs (Craig and Harris 1973). In this vein, what matters is how processes can improve this ratio, how more can be produced with less. This narrative likely rings true for many academics today, where increased student numbers, without proportionate increases in teaching support, are often noted (Kenny 2017; Tight 2019). In knowledge work, however, this logic of productivity is challenged; value cannot be captured by counting outputs alone (Drucker 1999; Iazzolino and Laise 2018). Instead, what matters is the quality of the work. In judging the performance of a teacher, Drucker (1999), in fact, directly positions this as knowledge work as he reflected, 'we do not ask how many students can be in the class. We ask how many students learn anything – and that's a quality question' (84). Table 1 summarises these contrasting logics across five dimensions to further illustrate their key differences.

Table 1. Comparison of manual labourers to knowledge worker roles.

Dimension	Manual labourers	Knowledge workers
Task definition	Tasks are allocated, externally defined and scoped	Worker defines the task based on professional judgement
Task sequencing and prioritisation	Tasks, including sequencing and prioritisation, determined by managers	Worker determines priorities among concurrent demands
Economic framing	Labour is a cost to be minimised towards greatest volume	Workers are seen as assets to be continually developed to improve organisational capability
Improvement and innovation	Methods are standardised; workers are discouraged from variation	Workers are encouraged to explore new methods for continuous improvement and innovation
Value of work	Quantity, ratio of outputs to inputs	Quality of work produced, often difficult to measure or longitudinal outcomes

Lens: 'doing the right things and doing them right'

Key in Drucker's work is his framing of knowledge worker productivity as twofold: doing the right things and doing them right (Drucker 1999). The first dimension concerns effectiveness. Paramount for the knowledge worker is the central question of 'what is the task?'. And far from simple, this question requires nuance, deep knowledge, and expertise to answer well. Unlike manual labour, where tasks are externally defined, knowledge workers must determine their own contributions (Drucker 1999; Turriago-Hoyos, Thoene, and Arjoon 2016). The answer will vary depending on context, environment, available resources, and competing demands. Core to productivity, then, is that the knowledge worker can exercise their professional judgement to decide what to do, especially as contexts change. Without this capability, knowledge workers efficiency becomes meaningless, doing the wrong things well produces little value (Iazzolino and Laise 2018).

The second dimension concerns efficiency. Secondary to doing the right things is doing them right, or how the task should be executed, once it has been determined. Drucker again places the onus on the knowledge worker, rather than the organisation, to exercise judgement here, for example, selecting appropriate methods, sequencing activities, and allocating time and quality standards. This contrasts considerably with manual labour, where methods are standardised, and quality standards are prescribed by the organisation (Drucker 1999). Further, for knowledge workers, methods are not fixed; quite the contrary, workers are expected to continually search for innovation and improvement (Todericiu and Beca 2022). Efficiency in knowledge work is thus not simply 'doing more with less' but doing the determined task in the most appropriate way possible. Both dimensions require professional judgement, and both are the responsibilities of the knowledge worker themselves.

This framing warrants brief clarification. Productivity discourse has often been mobilised in universities in ways that intensify workloads and legitimise managerial control (Kenny 2018), and scepticism toward Drucker's corporate origins is understandable. This paper does not treat this framework as a managerial prescription, but as an analytical device for examining how education-focused work is organised, allocated and evaluated. Used in this way, the distinction between doing the right things and doing things right helps explain why education-focused roles remain misaligned with institutional systems despite explicit commitments to teaching quality. This positioning sits alongside,

rather than in opposition to, scholarship documenting the persistent undervaluation and low status of teaching-focused roles (Bull et al. 2025; Gretton and Raine 2017). Undervaluation is real and consequential. However, it does not fully explain why role ambiguity and workload intensification persist even where teaching is rhetorically celebrated and formally recognised in promotion criteria. A productivity lens makes visible the assumptions embedded in workload models and role design, particularly the tendency to treat educational work through delivery-oriented logics. The contribution of this paper lies in reframing education-focused roles as a problem of work design, rather than solely a deficit of esteem or scholarly legitimacy.

Background to framing EFAs as manual labourers

The framing of EFAs as manual labourers has historical roots. As universities shifted toward massification, accommodating more students and a greater number of disciplines and courses, academic workload models evolved accordingly (Tight 2019). Teaching labour was progressively disaggregated from research and supported by a growing number of contingent or precarious academic staff (McComb, Eather, and Imig 2021). These teaching-intensive positions were expected to absorb the increased teaching workload, yet more often than not, they came without access to professional learning, career development, or allocated time for curriculum and assessment enhancement (Heffernan 2018; McComb, Eather, and Imig 2021). Meanwhile, 'high-level' curriculum design and academic judgement remained with the permanent academic staff. This arrangement was underpinned by a pragmatic logic: academics were deemed too costly to deploy for what was framed as low-level teaching work, and the delegation of teaching to contingent staff was expected to free academics' time for research, thereby improving the university's reputation and rankings (Williams 2022). In an era of funding constraints, with many governments decreasing higher education funding and encouraging universities to adopt neoliberal approaches (Olssen and Peters 2005), the separation of teaching practice from disciplinary oversight suited many institutions. The result, however, has been an entrenched and often 'mutually reinforcing dynamic' (Woelert, Croucher, and Hoang 2025) in which day-to-day teaching is both fragmented and positioned low on the university hierarchy of work (see also Heffernan and Smithers 2025).

The language of teaching delivery further reflects these historical roots. The term 'delivery' denotes the idea that teaching can be a task that is standardised, scheduled, and counted (Macfarlane 2011). In doing so, it separates the quality of curriculum and assessment design from its form of enactment, whether that be a lecture, a tutorial, or the marking of assessments. This framing provides a useful way for institutions to parcel out instructional work to staff employed by the hour.

However, as casualisation in the academic workforce has become politically less palatable and institutions have moved to create permanent or continuing education-focused roles (Heffernan and Smithers 2025; Woelert, Croucher, and Hoang 2025), the workload model underpinning teaching has remained intact. In other words, EFAs have inherited a model designed for casual staff, carrying the same expectations of high-volume teaching, only now with added workload for the vaguely defined 'scholarly engagement' (Smith and Walker 2024). The result has been a largely lacklustre transformation. EFAs have greater job security than sessional staff but often lack the autonomy or resources for

genuine intellectual work that is often afforded to their research-active colleagues. This constraint is reinforced by appointment level. In 2024, 70% of EFAs were appointed at Level B (Lecturer) or below (FTE), whereas 71% of Teaching and Research academics were appointed at Level C (Senior Lecturer) or higher (Department of Education 2025), limiting EFAs access to the seniority through which curriculum authority, workload discretion, and scholarly leadership are usually exercised.

Using Drucker's framework of productivity, it becomes clear that EFAs are often positioned in ways that align more closely with manual labour than with knowledge work, particularly in relation to 'doing the right things'. In many contexts, EFAs, particularly those appointed at junior levels, have limited workload allocation or agency to meaningfully shape decisions about what units (also termed subjects and courses)[2] should be taught, or how the program-level course architecture unfolds across the student experience. Instead, they are frequently allocated responsibility for specific units on the basis of immediate practical needs, sometimes irrespective of disciplinary expertise or pedagogical interest. A dominant tendency in workload models is that work is constructed retrospectively by aggregating hours associated with class time, marking, and, occasionally, curriculum development (Kenny 2018). While this arrangement is not universal, it reflects a broader pattern linked to the concentration of EFAs at more junior academic levels and their central role in carrying the bulk of teaching delivery.

Within such structures, opportunities to negotiate context-sensitive workload adjustments are limited. For example, if a unit has historically low student satisfaction or requires significant industry engagement, there is little autonomy to decide on prioritisation or additional workload (Ross and Scanes 2025). They are expected to make do with what is given. Likewise, as the task itself is pre-determined, 'doing things right' is also constrained. Where workload recognition does not extend to deeper engagement with the unit design, evaluation or renewal, EFAs may struggle to invest in innovative teaching approaches or refreshed quality standards (Godbold, Matthews, and Gannaway 2023). In practice, institutional reward structures often privilege compliance and efficiency, such as using prescribed templates, following moderation procedures, and adhering to assessment turnaround times (Kenny 2017). Within Drucker's framework, this configuration aligns more closely with a logic of manual labour than with knowledge work.

Repositioning education-focused roles as knowledge workers

If EFAs are to realise their potential within contemporary universities and to also inhabit the space of knowledge workers, then both dimensions of Drucker's productivity framework must be addressed. This is not to suggest that there will be no aspects of education-focused roles that remain manual in nature, as discussed earlier, many professional jobs have components of both. Rather, this is to ensure that education-focused roles are not entirely manual labour; that their positions also support and reward the deep critical thinking and pedagogical expertise required to support high-quality learning experiences. Redressing this imbalance requires attention first to the effectiveness, ensuring that the right work is identified and made visible. Then the question becomes efficiency or ensuring that the work is carried out well. In this section, therefore, we outline Drucker's six principles for productivity in knowledge work, beginning with the first, and most significant, of 'task clarity'. We then discuss the implications of

repositioning education-focused roles as knowledge workers for future role design, workload allocation, and career and promotion pathways.

Doing the right things: task clarity

For Drucker, task clarity is the foundational requirement of knowledge worker productivity (Drucker 1999). Unlike manual labour, where tasks are externally defined and allocated, knowledge workers must understand their work deeply enough to determine what requires their attention and why. This demands more than a job description or general workload allocation, which in many cases assigns 60–85 per cent of time to teaching (Ross 2026). It requires sufficient context, information, and strategic insight to exercise judgement about where effort will create the most value (Drucker 1999; Turriago-Hoyos, Thoene, and Arjoon 2016).

Several prerequisites are necessary for knowledge workers to achieve task clarity. The first is stable employment, and here progress is evident, with many universities now employing EFAs on continuing contracts (Godbold, Matthews, and Gannaway 2023; Ross 2026). Yet stability alone is insufficient. Task clarity also requires transparency, meaning access to strategic conversations and institutional priorities (Drucker 1999). On this dimension, the picture is less encouraging. As documented in recent studies, many EFAs operate as satellite workers, several layers removed from senior leadership and strategic decision-making. Fleischner and Lutze-Mann (2025) describe such positions as existing 'on the margins', while Kaniadakis and Denney (2025) characterise EFAs as part of a 'taken-for-granted infrastructure' whose contributions remain largely hidden despite being essential to institutional functioning. In both framings, EFAs are often expected to exercise professional judgement without the contextual knowledge such judgement requires.

This exclusion reflects a deeper issue, namely, a lack of institutional trust. Tierney (2006) argues that trust is inherently social and relational, developed through repeated interactions and functioning as a reciprocal, dynamic exchange between parties. His framework also positions trust as involving risk, in which one party accepts the uncertainty that the other will act as expected. Applied to EFAs, this means institutions must be willing to take a risk on educators exercising their unique, likely discipline-specific professional judgement, even when outcomes are uncertain. Tierney also frames trust as a matter of faith. Universities that share strategic information with coal-face teaching staff demonstrate faith that this knowledge will be used productively. In return, EFAs are better positioned to achieve task clarity, and their pedagogical insights can inform institutional direction. Trust, then, is not merely a precondition for EFA effectiveness but a mechanism through which institutional decisions can be better informed by those closest to students' experiences.

Indeed, if EFAs are to 'do the right things,' they must be across institutional priorities. Research on faculty productivity consistently identifies awareness of current developments in one's field as a characteristic of productive researchers (Bland et al. 2005). Those who stay current with disciplinary literature and understand the key questions and priorities can direct their efforts accordingly. The same must be true of teaching. Educators need oversight of which units or cohorts are struggling, what initiatives are underway, and the latest developments in the field, as published through higher

education literature. Hand in hand with this is also the authority for EFAs to deprioritise, to say 'no' or at least 'not yet' when something else clearly demands attention. Yet evidence suggests this authority is often absent. Ross and Scanes (2025) found that EFAs frequently lack control over their roles, with work allocation determined by senior academics in leadership positions rather than by educators themselves. Participants described experiences ranging from micromanagement to being constrained to particular types of teaching, with little scope to shape their own contributions.

Task clarity, then, requires more than a role description. It demands stable employment, institutional transparency, reciprocal trust, awareness of strategic priorities, and the authority to act on professional judgement. Where these conditions are absent, EFAs cannot determine what requires their attention and why, and productivity in Drucker's sense becomes impossible. With task clarity established as the foundation, attention turns to the second dimension of knowledge work productivity: doing things right.

Doing things right: applying Drucker's remaining principles

Once the task is clarified, attention turns to how it can be carried out effectively. Drucker's framework offers five further principles that distinguish knowledge work from manual labour, each with direct implications for education-focused roles.

The first is autonomy. Where task clarity concerns identifying what work matters, autonomy concerns how that work is carried out. Knowledge workers must be able to determine methods, sequencing, and time allocation based on professional judgement rather than managerial prescription (Drucker 1999). All academic work operates under workload constraints and performance expectations. However, the form those constraints take matters. Research workload is typically governed by expectations that are evaluated over time, allowing academics discretion to define problems, sequence work, and respond to emerging findings. By contrast, teaching workloads are more often governed by advanced specifications, where teaching, marking, and development time are set upfront and tightly bound. As Bull et al. (2025) show, workload models frequently allocate minimal preparation or development time relative to teaching time, limiting scope for planning and renewal. Critically, having a say in one's workload is itself work. Time must be allocated not only to teaching and its associated tasks, but also to planning, reflection, and negotiation through which workload decisions are made. Where EFAs are handed a fully determined allocation with no capacity to shape its distribution, autonomy exists in name only.

The second principle is continuous innovation. Knowledge workers are expected not merely to perform existing tasks but to seek better ways of doing them. For EFAs, this involves trialling new pedagogical approaches, redesigning curriculum and assessment, and adopting emerging educational technologies. It also involves taking a scholarly approach to evaluating the effectiveness of innovations, through action research, evidence-based inquiry, or specific SoTL methodologies (Bernstein 2018; Hubball and Clarke 2010). Importantly, it also means having the ability to try and fail, as emerging research in academic development underscores the value in learning from failed, or 'null' results (Ross and Call-Cummings 2020; Timmermans and Sutherland 2020). Enabling continuous innovation requires institutions to establish mechanisms that

recognise and resource engagement with rapid developments in teaching and learning, including generative AI and other technologies that are reshaping how students learn and requiring structural changes to assessment design (Dollinger and Nieminen 2026). Engagement with industry and community partners is also relevant here, ensuring the curriculum remains responsive to the contexts students will enter. Where innovation is treated as optional or expected to occur in personal time, or discouraged through risk-averse evaluation practices, this knowledge work will continue to be 'invisible'.

Third, continuous learning is essential. As educational work itself evolves, so too must the capabilities required to perform it well. Institutional policy must position professional development for EFAs as a core component of the role, rather than as a discretionary activity. This expectation aligns with the Universities Accord final report, which emphasises sustained professional development as central to the future quality of Australian higher education (Department of Education 2024). At the same time, professional learning cannot be left entirely to individual discretion, nor can it rely on unconstrained external provision. Institutions have a responsibility to establish foundational expectations for ongoing capability development aligned to institutional priorities, while also enabling structured flexibility for educators to pursue more advanced or specialised development responsive to their teaching context. This may include, for example, co-design initiatives with students, others may focus on employability or educational technologies, and still others on assessment literacy or inclusive pedagogy. Peer learning, educator communities of practice, or even students-as-mentors programs offer scalable and institutionally sustainable mechanisms to enable discussion and good practice adoption within existing resource constraints (Boud 1999; Dollinger and Hanna 2025; Du et al. 2025)

Fourth, evaluation frameworks must balance quality with quantity. Performance expectations that privilege volume, whether teaching hours, student numbers, or assessment turnaround times, risk obscuring the dimensions of educational work that matter most. Student satisfaction scores, often used as a proxy for teaching quality, are particularly problematic. Research from Heffernan and colleagues consistently highlights issues from student bias and discrimination on educator gender and race, to the abusive comments and impact on academic mental health from such evaluations (Heffernan 2022, 2023; Heffernan and Allen 2024). Improving educational experiences may require sustained investment in activities that are not easily captured by quantitative metrics, including relationship-building, formative feedback, and iterative curriculum refinement, whose benefits often accrue over time rather than within short evaluation cycles. Evaluation systems that default to what is easiest to count risk reinforcing the logic of delivery rather than recognising the complexity of educational work.

Finally, education-focused academics must be treated as assets rather than costs. This principle has both material and symbolic dimensions. Materially, it implies stable employment, genuine progression pathways, and inclusion in institutional governance. Symbolically, it means positioning pedagogical expertise as a strategic resource rather than an operational expenditure to be minimised. Evidence suggests that academics who seek teaching-focused roles are experienced and motivated by a passion for teaching, with enormous potential to improve teaching quality and student experience where institutions consider more effective approaches to their utilisation (Horey et al. 2025). The expertise of EFAs could inform policy and procedure development, guide strategic

Table 2. Applying Drucker's principles of knowledge-worker productivity to education-focused roles

Drucker principle	Application to education-focused academic roles
1. Task clarity	Education-focused academics operate within clearly defined, institutionally recognised role parameters that articulate both fixed teaching inputs and anticipated outputs. Role definitions also encompass broader knowledge-work responsibilities, including curriculum and assessment design, scholarship of teaching and learning, and the application of evidence-based approaches to pedagogical enhancement.
2. Ability to self-manage (autonomy)	Workload models balance fixed, non-negotiable elements (such as scheduled teaching hours and assessment periods) with structured autonomy for academics to plan, prioritise, and respond adaptively to emerging circumstances. This flexibility enables professional judgement in allocating effort across competing demands.
3. Continuous innovation	Education-focused academics are expected and recognised for ongoing innovation within their practice. This includes curriculum and assessment redesign, trialling novel pedagogical approaches, adopting emerging educational technologies, and fostering engagement with industry and community partners to enhance educational relevance and impact.
4. Continuous learning	Education-focused academics are expected and recognised for sustained professional development aligned with their roles. Within institutionally defined expectations, and consistent with principles of autonomy, this development may take varied forms, including co-design initiatives with students, peer learning, participation in workshops and conferences, and acquisition of competencies in emerging educational technologies.
5. Balance quality with quantity	Performance expectations prioritise educational quality and student learning outcomes alongside quantitative metrics such as teaching load or student numbers. Evaluation frameworks recognise that optimising student learning may require investment in activities not easily captured through volume-based measures alone.
6. Treated as an asset rather than a cost	Institutions leverage the pedagogical expertise of education-focused academics to inform policy and procedure development, guide strategic priorities related to students' experiences, and contribute to decision-making regarding curriculum design and enactment. Their specialist knowledge is positioned as a strategic institutional resource rather than an operational expenditure to be minimised.

priorities related to students' experiences, and contribute to decision-making regarding curriculum design and enactment. Where EFAs are excluded from such conversations and deployed solely to 'deliver' teaching, their expertise remains untapped. Please refer to Table 2 for a summary.

Implications for education-focused roles today

Australian universities are currently operating in a context of sustained budgetary pressure, with 70 per cent reporting deficits in 2023 (Universities Australia 2024), alongside expanding regulatory requirements and workforce reforms linked to decasualisation. While the volume of teaching work has not diminished and core teaching functions must remain viable, this paper does not argue for expansion divorced from these realities. Rather, it contends that even under constraint, how education-focused work is framed, allocated, and evaluated matters. Against this backdrop, Drucker's principles of knowledge work point to three interrelated areas where institutional design choices are consequential for education-focused roles: role design and authority, workload and capability investment, and career and promotion frameworks.

Role design and authority

First, if EFAs are to function as knowledge workers, role design must align responsibility for educational work with formal decision-making authority. Position descriptions

routinely reference curriculum design, assessment, and pedagogical enhancement, yet they rarely specify where authority over educational decisions sits. The result is a design flaw, where EFAs are held accountable for educational quality while the authority to shape such quality is often vested in other leadership roles that no longer involve teaching. Consistent with Drucker's emphasis on task clarity and autonomy, the remedy is to integrate education-focused roles into educational governance, with explicit authority over defined spheres of influence.

Possibilities for the redistribution of authority are likely to look very different across different kinds of institution. For example, the power dynamics between educators and senior leaders will differ depending on both the university ranking and its positioning, e.g. research-intensive, technical, or teaching-oriented. Further, while only senior leaders can enact formal redistribution of authority, formal redistribution alone will likely not suffice. As Kezar (2018) has argued, institutions that change their structures without changing underlying beliefs and assumptions often fail to drive long-term change. As an example, adding a designated EFA seat to an academic quality committee does little without structurally considering how day-to-day unit or program decisions are made. Similarly, allocating designated EFA time for curriculum development or the scholarship of learning and teaching, while still propagating the belief that teaching scale and timeliness matter most, means that such workload is the first thing sacrificed when enrolments rise. Structural change and belief change must therefore move together; either alone leaves EFAs accountable for educational quality they lack the authority, or the institutional backing, to shape.

One route to enact greater distribution of power is through what Empson (2017) calls a 'leadership constellation', in which a shifting group of individuals exerts influence through peer credibility rather than formal authority. Participation in centrally-led initiatives and cross faculty projects offers EFAs entry into such constellations, extending their contribution to governance beyond committee appointments and formal leadership roles. While access to these opportunities remains uneven, they allow a wider variety of voices to shape institutional vision and strategy.

Workload and capability investment

Second, expertise requires time. And to make use of this time, institutional infrastructure to support EFA's ongoing development is critical. Universities have the power to move the dial on both. If EFAs are expected to operate as experts in teaching and learning, workload models must allocate developmental time as part of core work, not as an optional activity once teaching delivery has been assigned. This time must then be supported through high-quality, rigorous professional development opportunities, not as one-off atomised sessions that EFAs are expected to fit around heavy teaching loads (Bull et al. 2025). For example, professional development opportunities offered as structured programs, rather than 'drop ins', taught by experienced higher education curriculum and pedagogical experts, and designed to support EFAs to form peer communities.

In the same vein, universities must also consider supporting EFAs who have not yet developed the necessary foundational understandings of pedagogy or assessment and curriculum design. Unlike research-focused academics, whose research time is underpinned by extensive disciplinary and methodological training, many teaching academics

enter their roles without formal preparation in higher education pedagogy or the scholarship of teaching and learning (Norton, Sonnemann, and Cherastidtham 2013). When such oversight continues, not only are EFAs roles seen as lesser, but the staff who inhabit them without the proper training are unlikely to succeed.

Career and promotion frameworks

Finally, education-focused roles require distinct and credible career and promotion pathways that recognise educational excellence on its own terms. Promotion frameworks are a key mechanism through which institutions signal what work counts. Where EFAs are assessed within models built around teaching-and-research roles, even with adjustments for workload, educational expertise remains positioned as a variation on a research norm rather than as a distinct form of academic excellence. A key example of this is in the commonly used 'teaching' dimension, where not only are EFAs expected to report on the manual aspects of their work (e.g. classes taught, retention), but on their scholarship of learning and teaching (SoTL) teaching innovation as well. But through the recommendations of this article, we instead encourage universities to keep the 'teaching' dimension as akin to solely manual logics and instead reframe the 'research' dimension for EFAs to also include SoTL and teaching innovation (e.g. introducing a new pedagogical approach or educational technology tool). This work, as discussed, is after all knowledge work, and just like traditional research outputs requires both drawing on the literature and navigating deep expertise to carry out well. In fact, variations of such promotion frameworks is already well underway in Australia and internationally demonstrating that such pathways are both feasible and equally rigorous (see Deakin University 2025 for an example). Where they are clearly articulated and consistently applied, they enable EFAs to build careers based on educational leadership and impact rather than on approximating teaching-and-research trajectories.

Conclusion

The stakes of our argument extend beyond individual EFA career sustainability. Contemporary teaching demands continuous adaptation to increasingly diverse student cohorts, rapid technological change, and evolving expectations from employers and accrediting bodies. These demands are unlikely to be met within delivery-oriented models that treat teaching as a set of tasks to be allocated and measured. They require the professional judgement, ongoing learning, and capacity for innovation that characterise knowledge work. The context of generative AI illustrates this perfectly, as educators are challenged to redesign curriculum and assessment (Corbin, Dawson, and Liu 2025; Dollinger and Nieminen 2026). This is essential knowledge work, demanding the deep professional judgement that delivery-oriented models constrain.

Reconceptualising EFAs as knowledge workers enables institutions to reconsider both what teaching work is prioritised and how it is organised, aligning systems of governance with the dual demands of effectiveness and efficiency articulated in Drucker's productivity framework. Rather than treating teaching as a set of deliverables to be managed, this perspective foregrounds the design choices that shape how educational expertise is developed, exercised, and sustained over time. Most professional roles

contain elements of both manual and knowledge work, and education-focused roles are no exception. The problem arises when EFAs are positioned predominantly through the logic of manual labour, reducing their contribution to practice and foreclosing the strategic value their expertise could provide. Future research should continue to examine how these dynamics play out across institutional contexts, and trace what happens when institutions attempt the shift, including who leads it, what resistance emerges, and whether trust can be rebuilt where workload disputes have eroded it.

Realising this value requires deliberate alignment between role design, workload allocation, and career pathways on the one hand, and the principles of knowledge work productivity on the other. Role descriptions must clarify how EFAs will access the information and authority needed for task clarity. Workload models must allocate time for development, innovation, and scholarly engagement with teaching practice. Career structures must reward educational leadership with the same rigour applied to research. Where these conditions are met, EFAs can contribute not only to teaching practice but to the ongoing improvement of how students learn and how institutions support them.

Notes

1. These roles are variously termed "teaching-only," "teaching-focused," or "education-focused" across different universities and international contexts. We use "education-focused" to signal the broader intellectual work involved, including curriculum design, assessment leadership, and pedagogical scholarship, rather than teaching delivery alone. Note, in this paper we are referring only to education-focused roles that are permanent academic (sometimes referred to as continuing), not sessional, casual or short-term fixed-term roles.
2. Hereafter, the term units is used to refer collectively to units, subjects, and courses.

Authors' contributions

Mollie Dollinger contributed to the conceptualisation, analysis and drafting the manuscript. Jaclyn Broadbent contributed to the conceptualisation, analysis and drafting the manuscript. Tim Fawns contributed to the conceptualisation, analysis and drafting the manuscript. Danny Liu contributed to the conceptualisation, analysis and drafting the manuscript. Amanda White contributed to the conceptualisation, analysis and drafting the manuscript.

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