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Using self-determination theory as a lens to create sustainable futures for teaching and education focused academics in higher education in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Australian higher education has faced both global economic and environmental challenges, including most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. To deliver in this resource constrained environment, academic workforce and academic roles are being reshaped. Teaching and education focused academic roles are rapidly increasing but come with opportunities and challenges. Opportunities include relief from research to concentrate on teaching which they do well and enjoy. Challenges include the dangers of unrelenting repetitive teaching workloads, lower status, uncertainty about promotion and parity of esteem. This study used Self Determination Theory to analyse the responses of nine teaching focussed academics and found the reality of the role was restricted autonomy, difficulties in evidencing individual competency and confusion about expertise. Teaching focussed academics expressed the importance of building communities distinctive from their disciplinary training. Higher education policy solutions are needed to build cultures where teaching focussed academics can overcome challenges and create sustainable career futures.

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Teaching focused academic roles; education focused academic roles; self determination theory; academic workforce; higher education

Introduction

For several decades, Australian higher education has faced economic and environmental challenges including most recently the COVID-19 pandemic (Marginson, 2000, 2007; McGaughey et al., 2021; Salehi et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2021). Paradoxically, higher education in Australia is inextricably linked and vital to finding solutions to these same challenges. Higher education produces knowledge, skills and research which add to the quality of lives (O’Kane et al., 2024, p. 1) and graduates that increase Australian prosperity.

Questions have been raised, however, about the extent to which higher education in Australia can deliver solutions for current challenges within the resource strained

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environment (Bradley et al., 2008; O’Kane et al., 2024) and restrictive higher education workforce models (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012; James et al., 2015; Norton, 2016). Many posit for higher education to succeed in alternative academic workforce models and changes to the academic role will need to be made because ‘the academic career structure no longer meet the operational demands of the current environment and create many barriers to success’ (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012, p. 887). Suggested alternative workforce models differentiate academic roles so that they are better fit for purpose in either education or research, the former with an emphasis on teaching and the latter with an emphasis on research, entrepreneurial and commercialisation skills (Croucher, 2023; Locke, 2012; Marini et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2022; Teichler et al., 2013; Whitchurch, 2019; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010).

It is now common in many Australian higher education universities to have academic roles in three distinct categories: teaching or education-focused, teaching and research integration (also known as the 40:40:20 traditional academic role) and research focused. Of these three roles, teaching or education focused roles are growing the most rapidly (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). Changes to academic roles have not, as argued by Coates and Goedegebuure (2012), happened through a ‘collective agenda that proactively shapes the academic profession to the benefit of all’ (p. 887). Instead, changes to academic roles have been mainly uncoordinated local decisions caused by institutional pressures and system-wide drivers (Wolf & Jenkins, 2020, 2021). The lack of coherency in approach in Australia is perhaps best evidenced by the multiple labels used to describe teaching focused roles which all have a common focus on teaching, but depending on the specific Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, are known as Teaching or Education Focused Academics, Teaching Only, Teaching Specialists, Scholarly Teaching Fellows, or Teaching Intensive. The variation in labelling reflecting variability in workload allocation to teaching compared to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and/or pedagogical or education research.

Whatever the label, expectations are that these roles will collectively deliver on excellence in teaching and an improved student experience which will enable higher education to better serve their communities. The expectations of these roles, however, are not necessarily a given. There are many unknowns about the long-term impact of teaching or education focused role where disciplinary research has been ‘unbundled’, separated or removed entirely from teaching (Probert, 2013, 2015; Ross et al., 2022).

What we do know about the experiences of teaching focused academics in these roles are mixed and come with both opportunities and challenges. Opportunities include the relief at finally being released from the burden of chasing research funding and instead concentrating on teaching (Bush et al., 2008, 2020; Flecknoe et al., 2017; Probert, 2013; Rawn & Fox, 2018; Ross et al., 2023). Challenges even for the same academics include, anxiety about high, unrelenting and repetitive teaching workloads, with concerns about on-going lower status and uncertainty about promotion including rate of progression and future career mobility and being able to secure education leadership positions (Bush et al., 2020; Flecknoe et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2022). Recent studies highlight that teaching focused academics also experience confusion about the purpose of their roles (Godbold et al., 2023) including concerningly that they perceive ‘their departments expect them to keep up with disciplinary research rather than a focus on teaching’ (p. 325).

It is difficult to predict what the future holds for teaching focused academics. On the one hand, the future could be quite bleak. A future where teaching focused academics have high workloads and where evidence of success as an individual academic in a team-teaching context is hard to collect. A future where independence and agency are reduced (Kinchin, 2022) which leads to stress, demotivation and burn-out (Ross et al., 2023). On the other hand, if the right culture and policies are in place, there is a greater chance for teaching focused academics to create satisfying careers to deliver on expectations (Bush et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2022; Whitchurch et al., 2023) and enable higher education institutions and individuals to build greater adaptive capacity and resilience (Kinchin, 2024; Krause, 2022; Ross et al., 2023).

It is not straightforward in the Australian higher education context to get the right policies in place to create sustainable career futures for teaching focused academics (Loch et al., 2024). This is in part because there is a lack of 'realistic representations of what teaching focused academic work looks like in practice' (Godbold et al., 2023, p. 332), but moreover 'theoretically founded research regarding academics has been scarce and needed' (Watt & Richardson, 2020, p. 1). Watt and Richardson (2020), emphasise more research is needed on academic work and too little is known about the psychological influence of context on academic motivation, which leads to either thriving or burnout.

For decades, Self Determination Theory has been successfully applied as a framework across work domains (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008; Deci et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2019) including education (Goroizidis & Papaioannou, 2016; Guillaume & Kalkbrenner, 2019; Haw et al., 2023; Núñez et al., 2015; Stupnisky et al., 2019; Watt & Richardson, 2020). Self Determination Theory suggests that there are the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be satisfied as a necessary condition of work for optimal motivation, well-being

Self Determination Theory - Predicts

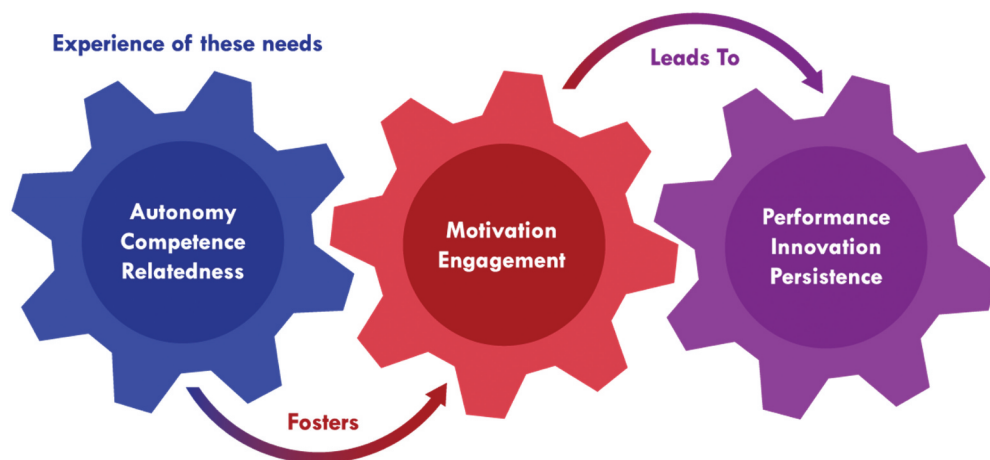


Figure 1. Self determination theory describes the vital psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness.

and performance (Deci et al., 2017; Figure 1). Guillaume and Kalkbrenner (2019) found the three tenants of Self Determination Theory (autonomy, competence and relatedness) were important for academics, from minority backgrounds, to build sustainable careers. Whether all academic roles have the same degree of autonomy, competence and relatedness is unknown. Research done so far on academic work suggests that teaching focused roles do not have the same degree of autonomy, expertise or competence and community as their research or teaching and research focused colleagues (Flecknoe et al., 2017; Loch et al., 2024; Ross et al., 2022). The extent of the difference perhaps being so great as to limit their motivation, well-being, performance and long-term progression and persistence (Figure 1).

The aim of this study was to investigate the usefulness of Self Determination Theory as a lens to analyse and understand the experiences and responses of teaching focused academics. This study contributes to the limited research done on academic work and enables the development of evidence-based policies for teaching focused academics. Importantly, it starts to fill the gap in our understanding of how to create sustainable teaching focused academic careers, academic roles which are still relatively new in the higher education ecosystem in Australia.

Theoretical background self determination theory

Self Determination Theory emerged in the 1980s as an organism theory in psychology to explain the whole development of human motivation and performance, with an emphasis on the vital psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness which enhance or undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation and wellbeing and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Autonomy being defined as the need to have control over our lives

‘This does not mean that the need for autonomy is about the control of the environment, but rather a need to be self-determining, that is, to have a choice’ (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 31). Deci and Ryan (1985) make a clear distinction between choice and control. A person has control when their behaviour reliably yields outcomes. Control in itself, however, does not ensure self-determination, because a person can become a pawn pressured to attain certain outcomes by their environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The need is for self-determination (i.e., for choice) rather than for control (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 31); they may choose to exercise control or choose to give up control. When they do not or cannot gain control, this can lead to negative outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 38) and a feeling of helplessness and impaired performance (p. 37).

Competence being defined as the need to develop mastery and expertise

People receive a reward when they experience the inherent feeling of competency that results from effective functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 27). The need for competence leads people to seek and conquer challenges which are just beyond their current level of competence. Deci and Ryan (1985), state that a new acquisition of a skill has a period of ‘playful exercising’ but boredom can occur when this skill is exercised again and again (p. 27).

Relatedness being defined as the need to pursue connectedness in social groups creating a sense of belonging to a community

People need to feel connected to others and to show care and be cared for (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231) which is highly advantageous (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 253).

Deci and Ryan (2000, p. 228) state that ‘psychological development and well-being, cannot be achieved without addressing the three psychological needs – for competence, relatedness, and autonomy – are considered essential for understanding the what (i.e., content) and why (i.e., process) of goal pursuits’. When these needs are not satisfied, then invariably there are negative consequences for mental health and wellbeing. When these needs are satisfied, they result in increased creativity, problem solving and a higher level of performance.

Methodology

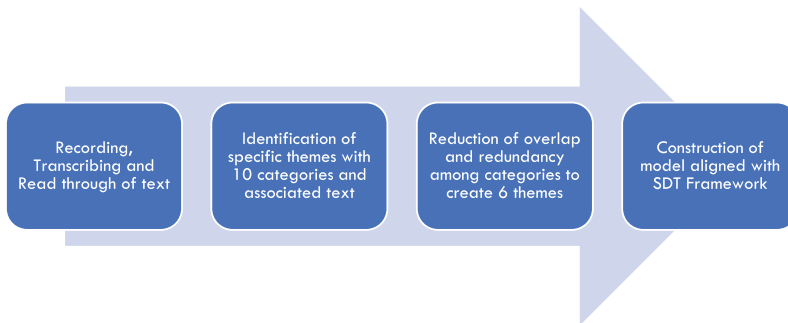
This study involved a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 32 academics. Out of 32 academics interviewed nine of these academics had made the decision to be transferred into teaching or education-focused academic roles. Transcripts of eight interviews with nine teaching focused academics with over a decade of experience were selected (one interview session included two teaching focused academics) because they were representative of teaching focused academics nationally having all commenced in their positions when teaching focused role were introduced at two major research-intensive universities in Australia from 2006 to 2009, respectively. Further, they were leaders and influencers in national discipline networks and communities. The gender ratio included more females compared to males being seven females and two males (78:22 ratio) (Table 1). Typically, there are more females than males in teaching focused academic roles (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024).

Qualitative inquiry and semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 min were used to create a dialogue between the facilitator and interviewee (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Jamshed, 2014). A series of 15 questions were used to explore participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs and to delve deeply into sometimes sensitive issues (please see Table S1 in the online supplementary material).

These interviews were recorded. Following recording, the interviews were transcribed by a professionally accredited transcription service (Pacific Transcription Co.

Table 1. The number and identification of interviewees from universities classified as research intensive (Group of Eight, Go8). Academic level of appointment (from mid-career academic level B to professor level E) and gender (male, female) is provided.

Smaller data set interviewee number in this study	Level of Academic	Gender
1	D	F
2	D	F
3	C	F
4	D	F
5	E	F
6	D	M
7	B	F
8	D	F
9	C	M

Table 2. Inductive analyses used to code transcribed themes, following Thomas (2006) p. 6.

Coding and identification of themes, reduction of overlap and redundancies, final themes and alignment of final themes with SDT

Number	Coding 1	Coding 2	Overlap	Number	Final themes	SDT
1	Mixed Messages	Value	Value, expertise and merit	1	Value and quality	Autonomy
2	Expertise	Expertise	Scholarship and expertise	2	Scholarship and expertise	Competence
3	Reputation	Reputation	Reputation, scholarship, research and funding			
4	Flexibility and Mobility	Scholarship				
5	Funding	Funding				
6	Progress and Promotion	Progress and Promotion	Progress, promotion, merit and metrics	3	Progress and mobility	Competence
7	Education Research	Education Research		4	Status and identity	Competence
8	Community	Community	Community	5	Community and culture	Relatedness
9	Students	Students		6	Students	Relatedness
10	Merit	Metrics and Merit	Value and Expertise			

Milton, QLD, Australia). Then general inductive coding was done to identify themes through careful reading of the text by two independent researchers using the approach of Thomas (2006). A further cycle of theme coding of text was done to synthesise textural and structural meanings (Saldana, 2015). These two cycles of coding identified six emergent themes. These themes were 1. Value and quality, 2. Scholarship and reputation, 3. Progress and mobility 4. Status and identity 5. Community and culture 6. Students. To explore the degree of alignment with the Self Determination Theory, these six themes were further reduced (Moustakas, 1994). Progress and mobility were aligned with autonomy. Value and quality, scholarship and reputation and status and identity aligned with competence. Community and culture and students were aligned with relatedness (Table 2). Both positionality and reflexivity were considered when undertaking this research to question interpretations and evaluations (Dodgson, 2019).

Research Ethics clearance was applied for using the Australian National Ethics Application Form process now replaced by the Human Research Ethics Application

and assessed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at an Australian university. Full details will be supplied following peer review.

Results

Autonomy

Teaching focused academics expressed shared experiences about the lack of control over their role. They described mainly male non-teaching focused academics in senior leadership positions, who were powerful and who were in control and determined the experiences and work allocation of both female and male teaching focused academics.

Depending on the head of the department, some heads of departments give them more authority and step back and let them run things, other heads of departments really micro-manage the role. Interviewee 1, Level D

They also described the constraints on the type and breadth of work, including teaching focused academics constrained in service teaching roles (not teaching science students directly).

Let's not go there. It was a bit difficult. He had a whole lot of ideas about how teaching should run in the place and didn't really involve the teaching focused staff too much. So the courses for students in science programs are basically all coordinated by staff with teaching and research positions and the service teaching for all the physios and pharmacy and everybody else are all coordinated by teaching focused staff. Interviewee 2, Level D.

They also described experiences of high teaching workloads for teaching focused academics who either lacked job security, had lost their jobs or decided to leave, even after receiving national recognition for education excellence, mainly because of lack of recognition by senior academics of the value of the role.

She got a fairly brutal deal. She was appraised positively enough but the amount of teaching she was given, I mean she was just given a ridiculous amount that she wasn't able to manage it all and, oh I said you can't ask her to do all that. So he did. I mean it's just far too much work for anyone to deal with. Then she doesn't manage it and then it's sort of - then she ends up with poor student evaluation scores because she's not on top of the work. That was part of the reason that she left, and it's not okay I don't think. Interviewee 1, Level D.

They described that success could occur if they were able to secure the support from mainly male non-teaching focused academics, especially if the non-teaching focused academic viewed the success of a teaching focused academic as their own success. This was especially important for progress through promotion.

You need someone in your corner who's powerful. You need the backing. He said to me, I'm not going to promote you unless you can convince me. I'm not convinced, and I don't want to fail. I've had 100 per cent success rates in terms of my endorsements of my staff. Interviewee 6, Level D

Concerningly, they described a dynamic of where men without sufficient understanding of education and were appointed by men, with paternalistic behaviour being common.

Our new director of education has got no idea. Because he's a boy and he gets on. Our head of school is - runs the place a bit like a boys' club, he would be the last person to admit that.

He thinks he's very kind to women and the director of education thinks he's very kind to women too and he is kind but his view of what women can do is I should help women, not I should provide opportunity for challenges for women. Interviewee 1, Level D.

In contrast, to these disturbing experiences, there were also more optimistic evidence of growing autonomy among teaching focused academics who had observed changes in themselves.

When I first started it was like you'd been in the forest. It wasn't a forest. It was like being on those savannahs, the plains, African savannah. You are working out if there is a lion around the corner about something you forgot to do, ethics and all that sort of thing. It very much is finding your way. I think we could do a better job of having an understanding of what's involved. Interviewee 4, Level D.

Competence

Teaching focused academics shared stories about encounters with research focussed or teaching and research colleagues who made disparaging comments about the expertise of teaching focused academics, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and education research.

Education as touchy feely rather than being robust, yeah. I think that's reflected in [unclear] practice. I think it is. People I even talk to who are education focused - one of my colleagues at [University]. He's level D. Doesn't do any scholarship stuff. Managed to get to level D because he has a high media presence around maths for kids. Interesting guy, and I gave him an article to review one day, and he said, well, I wouldn't read that shit. I don't respect any of that stuff that goes on in those journals, he said, I don't think that's real education. How extreme. Here you are cashing in as an education-focused academic at - recently elevated to level D. But what you're saying that, every other academic - sorry, every other education-focused person, or people doing scholarship stuff, is rubbish. I think his view probably reflects the broader view amongst T&R staff about what education focus people do, and the scholarship and what they do. I think it's less valued. For sure. Interviewee 6, Level D.

Despite the disrespect shown by their colleagues, teaching focused academics understood the value of their work.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning - our research colleagues look down upon it and think it's low level research. They think it lacks integrity, but I don't know, I guess once you're in it and you're doing it you kind of have a bit more faith in it because you've seen where the results come from and you've heard what the students have said. but my colleagues, research colleagues, don't have any understanding. Interviewee 1, Level D.

Many teaching focused academics recognised and were aware that being accepted as equivalent status to their research focussed or research and teaching focussed colleagues would take time and require cultural change within the institution. Promotion processes and committees were the one time when teaching focused academics could have their competence recognised. However, this did not always go to plan, and many teaching focused academics had suboptimal experiences which did not lead to successful promotion.

Feedback that I got when I applied for a promotion unsuccessfully at that level was, you need to have more journal publications. I also was told that, we would expect that your teaching evaluations would be higher, which is not something that is in the criteria that are written down. It just seemed an expectation that student evaluations will be better than some imagined level while you're doing a heavy teaching load, and you're establishing, and becoming a national figure in education research, or Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in your disciplinary area. Interviewee 7, Level B.

Teaching focused academics were aware that the challenges for promotion were more acute at upper levels, where promotion was sought to associate or full professor.

It is a challenge, I think, for these roles, is what are the benchmarks of the higher levels, because it's different for different people and where their journeys have taken them. A to B and B to C is ok, C to D a bit harder, D to E very difficult. Interviewee 4, Level D.

Teaching focused academics also recognised that a key to success was to survive in a new field, albeit this would be a painful experience and could involve suffering, and long term the opinion of supervisors and promotion committees' would not be a barrier to success.

I guess. I've started to - so writing that style of publication was a big learning curve for me. It's something that I'm still not 100 per cent comfortable with, but it's getting more comfortable as, I guess, I start to publish. Interviewee 3, Level C.

You know, I think my earlier career was a bit floundering not having the tools I needed. I feel like I'm on one of those racks and I'm being torn, but I think that's a common feeling in a way. I feel like someone's got my arms at one and my feet at the other end and I remember thinking, what sort of life is this. Interviewee 7, Level B.

Relatedness

Another clear theme was the absence of relatedness, but need for, connection between other academics and students. There was, however, difficulty in building connections and establishing and community with other teaching focused academics. Often these communities were being built and located outside their immediate discipline, school and institution.

So, there's not a community within your day-to-day organisation. That was - that's one of the other criteria that's been problematic for me, as well. I haven't had postgraduate students working in education research. You haven't joined a research group and learned about the culture of doing research in that group - you're learning yourself how to do it. Interviewee 7, Level B.

Teaching focused academics recognised the importance of communication to make themselves visible.

You've got to communicate it. I think that's true for us as well as any students or anything. So I think for teaching focussed academics that's the main thing is to think about the ways of communicating. It can be in publications or conferences, but also can be teaching forums or communities. Interviewee 4, Level D.

There was evidence that teaching focused academics were more connected to other teaching focused academics than they were with non-teaching focused academic

colleagues from the same discipline and that newly formed communities would enable them to remain as teaching focused academics.

I don't think you can go back to that. I don't think I could ever create - try to create some sort of profile in disciplinary research. No, it's not going to happen. My connections with the broad range of biology educators is much stronger than my connections with my faculty or school colleagues. Interviewee 6, Level D.

For further responses from academics under each category, please see Table S2 in the online supplementary material.

Discussion

Usefulness of self-determination theory

Overall, this study found Self Determination Theory to be a potentially powerful heuristic lens to uncover the challenges faced by teaching focused academics. The academics interviewed here had made a decision to transfer from teaching and research academic roles to teaching focused academic role. Although universities are now advertising teaching and education focused roles, this is still a relatively new process.

The first challenge which these teaching focused academics faced was the limited capacity for choice and autonomy, which is critical for self-determination and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). All teaching focused academics interviewed in this study did have a choice when they were either appointed through a competitive process or had chosen to transfer to a teaching focused role. Once in the position, there was a significant lack of choice, with control being exerted over them by their supervisors and colleagues, including Directors of Education, who were often less knowledgeable and experienced. These supervisors were powerful because they were in control of teaching workload allocations and gate keepers of promotion. The majority of teaching focused academics were allocated to large first year or junior classes. Timing of promotion applications and success depended on support from a powerful supervisor, further restricting teaching focused academics autonomy.

Despite the lack of choice and autonomy, teaching focused academics remained optimistic in the face of adversity, convinced that senior colleagues and even promotion committees would 'catch up' and learn. Teaching focused academics were also intrinsically motivated to learn new methodologies and influence on teaching pedagogies and approaches and expressed satisfaction in teaching. This agency, despite being controlled by others, matches Ryan and Deci's (2000) descriptions of the importance of pursuing tasks associated with intrinsic rewards. However, perhaps longer term when novelty and intrinsic motivation wear thin, the dual lack of control and choice may have deleterious effects on the health, wellbeing and resilience or persistence of teaching focused academics. As Deci and Ryan (1985, p. 27) indicate, boredom can occur when a skill is exercised again and again.

The persistence of intrinsic motivation of teaching focused academics despite the frustration of lack of control, is similar to studies which also found the Self Determination Theory lens useful to explain that Faculty of Colour pursued tenure and

promotion even when there was a lack of control and support (Guillaume & Kalkbrenner, 2019).

The second challenge which teaching focused academics face is coming to terms with new expertise and competence. We found that teaching focused academics had almost daily doubts, confusion and asked questions about expertise and metrics. Sometimes teaching focused academics were unable to answer questions about the knowledge creation or research component of the role, especially whether they should concentrate on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, education or disciplinary research and the lack of time to create quality outcomes. Such dilemmas appear reasonable in a culture where research is privileged (Probert, 2013). Other studies have also found teaching focused academics experience confusion about time on the knowledge creation aspect of their work (Godbold et al., 2023). Other questions that teaching focused academics had difficulty answering were those related to student evaluation metrics. Teaching focused academics described questions from supervisors when student evaluations were both low and high, the latter albeit less pointedly. Student evaluation scores used to judge performance and teaching quality were considered by many as problematic regardless of value (Zabaleta, 2007). Although multiple studies have been done to assure student evaluation surveys as a valid mechanism to assess teaching quality (Marsh, 1980; Marsh, 1984; Marsh & Bailey, 1993), their significant shortcomings with low response rates, strong biases against females and/or culturally diverse non-native English speakers have become well known (Boring, 2017; Fan et al., 2019; Friederike et al., 2017; Hemmings & Kay, 2009; Kaschak, 1978; Sinclair & Kunda, 2000). Studies have also found student evaluations to also depend on whether academics are good-looking (Hamermesh & Parker, 2005) or easy marking (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997; Neath, 1996). The lack of valid metrics to judge individual performance when often teaching is a collaborative endeavour is set to be an ongoing problem for teaching focused academics and there is a need to draw on peer-review and other approaches (Skelton, 2005, 2012).

The culture in which teaching focused academics attempted to develop expertise was frequently challenging. For example, the language used by colleagues to describe teaching focused academics could be disparaging and on occasion offensive. Also, potentially the more interesting aspects of teaching focused roles which develop expertise such as curriculum, program design, evaluation, later years of undergraduate teaching, projects and dissertations, and Higher Degree Research (HDR) supervision were often reserved for teaching and research academics. This study also found that early career teaching focused academics were often restricted to teaching the lower-level large classes, which have repetitive tasks and involve a significant scale of setting and marking multiple-choice questions and assessments.

The final tenet of Self Determination Theory, which is challenging for teaching focused academics, is the importance and yet limited capacity to build meaningful and close relationships with colleagues. Teaching focused academics described the lack of and need to look for connections and relatedness outside their immediate department or university.

Within the university, teaching focused academics often engaged with communities that were cross-discipline, sometimes organised by a central unit. In Australia, there are national education communities supported by societies and organisations that are disciplinary and cross disciplinary. Almost all teaching

focused academics described the building of community differed from their colleagues' individually led research laboratories. Many teaching focused academics compared their own hesitant, uncertain and time-consuming attempts to build a community to the instant community made up of honours, HDR students and Early Career Academics created by their teaching and research or research focussed colleagues.

Overall, this study found teaching focused academics on a journey to master a new field and set of skills, be known and promoted for educational excellence because of their competency and expertise and build community within and outside the university. Deci and Ryan (2000), state that 'it is in people's nature to develop greater autonomy (as represented by greater integration within the self) and greater relatedness (as represented by the assimilation and integration of oneself within the social community). Not only are the two trajectories not antithetical but the healthiest development involves both' (p. 242). Concerningly, teaching focused academics often experienced extended periods of control by senior colleagues compared to their colleagues in teaching and research and research academic roles. This is concerning because too much control which subjugates autonomy over time can result in more generalised anger and resentment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

A critical observation of the discussion about autonomy in this study was the reduced capacity of teaching focused academics to act freely and exercise choice and instead they described a significant amount of autonomy frustration. Similarly, there was also a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of mastery in scholarship of teaching and learning or education research and a sense of social isolation and lack of relatedness. The frustrations and satisfaction of the three needs of Self Determination Theory are considered by Basic Psychological Need Theory (see review by Vansteenkiste et al., 2020), frustration being the stronger and more threatening experience as represented in this study.

Workload

Perhaps one of the most contentious and troubling aspects of teaching and education focused roles is what to do with the small percentage (i.e., 1 day a week) of workload allocation to knowledge creation through research (Ross et al., 2023). Teaching focused academics described the difficulty and time-consuming nature of learning the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and education research (Simmons et al., 2013). The reality for teaching focused academics, many of whom are no longer required and are discouraged from allocating the necessary time and resources to disciplinary research, is the need to master an entirely different set of epistemologies, methodologies and skills (Ross et al., 2022). This takes time and remains important because research in higher education is strongly linked to academic identity (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Hemmings & Kay, 2009; Henkel, 2005; Lackey, 2018; Teichler et al., 2013; Weatherson, 2018) and comes with significant prestige and reputational and financial rewards. There needs to be further consideration about the workload allocation to research in teaching and education focused roles to clear confusion and set priorities and expectations (Godbold et al., 2023).

Gendered nature of teaching focused academic work

In this study, almost all of the teaching focused academics were women. This could be at first seen as a sampling bias, but concerningly there is a dominance of women in teaching focused roles. For example, at Australian universities, in the last decade the percentage of female staff in full time and fractional teaching focused roles ranged from 54-61% compared to 39-45% for males and 41-46% for females in teaching and research academics roles (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). Further, whereas women in teaching only academic roles since 2014 have increased from 7-11% males have increased from 4-7%. This supports observations such as the dominance of women at education conferences (Whitchurch et al., 2023) and perceptions of women also interviewed in this study.

‘Most of the education-focused people are women’.

Interviewee 2, Level D. Given what we know from studies which have found women are more likely to take on teaching and teaching administration (González-Ramos et al., 2015; Thomas & Davies, 2002) and higher teaching loads (Thomas & Davies, 2002) this may not be unsurprising. Studies have found that women are known to *opt out* of competitive performance cultures (Forster, 2001). For those women who break through the *glass ceiling* and take on education leadership positions, such as in a curriculum review, they are more likely to fall off the *glass cliff* (Diezmann & Grieshaber, 2019; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Care needs to be taken that teaching focused roles are not a new form of *women’s work* rather like a domestic chore with an accompanying gendered wage gap (Ross, 2021).

Policies

Overall, this study suggests that Australian higher education institutional cultures and policies have not kept pace with the rapid change in academic roles. There are far fewer academics at the upper levels of D and E (Associate and full Professor) and many more at Level B. The skew in lower academic levels of teaching only compared to the distribution of levels for teaching and research academics, may reflect the relatively recency of these academic roles. It also perhaps reflects that we are yet to see the results of internal promotion policies which attempt to create equity among academic roles and levels. Self Determination Theory provides higher education management with a lens to create the policies that need to be put in place to build the right ecosystem in which the psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness of teaching focused academics are met. This is especially important for vulnerable early career teaching focused academics to calm the anxiety and uncertainty they may feel around career advancement, especially for women (Ross, 2021; Wolf & Jenkins, 2020, 2021). Without the right policies, it is not necessarily a given that teaching focused academics will be able to deliver on expectations. It is also clear that on the near horizon there will be questions about whether teaching focused academics improves educational quality and the student experience. Australian higher education management will want to know whether the changes made to the academic workforce, including the creation of teaching-focused roles, have been worth the investment. Already, these questions have been

asked in the United Kingdom (Wolf & Jenkins, 2020, 2021) and the answers are difficult to determine.

Conclusion – a matter of trust

In conclusion, the lack of trust in teaching focused academics was an emerging theme in this study. The importance of trust has been recently raised as a critical issue for higher education (Whitchurch et al., 2023). Although trust and the gaps in values between academics and higher education management are not new concepts and were well established before the COVID-19 pandemic (Winter & O'Donohue, 2012), the COVID-19 pandemic has further eroded trust (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Trust and values are important and 'underpin all aspects of academic and university life' (Winter & O'Donohue, 2012, p. 565). Finally, considered policy solutions are needed to build cultures where teaching focused academics can overcome challenges and in doing so deliver on expectations and create sustainable careers.

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