

Scholarly Teaching Fellows as a New Category of Employment in Australian Universities

Summary of Research Findings

In 2012, Australian universities faced increasing student demand and a growing reliance on a casualised workforce to deliver courses. The sector's lead trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), proposed a novel approach to extend teaching capacity and provide job security for a portion of the estimated 50,000 casual university teaching staff. By creating a career path for the casual academics who currently perform the bulk of face-to-face teaching in Australian universities, it was envisioned that teaching and learning would be improved and the student experience enhanced. Between 2012 and 2015, agreements negotiated between the NTEU and the majority of the sector's universities led to the creation of 850 positions for a new type of academic role: the Scholarly Teaching Fellow (STF). Although the original target was over 2000 positions, as of August 2018, Australian universities had employed around 800 STFs.

While the positions have had limited effect on reducing the overall size of the casual teaching workforce, they have had an important impact on the sector-wide debate about the relationship between research, scholarship and teaching. This project, funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching, investigates the initial development and implementation of the STFs with a focus on understanding the contextual experience of the role through extended interviews across a number of sites.

Research findings indicate that:

- The scale of STF implementation has been too small to have direct bearing on the number of casual academic staff employed but the positions have had a sector-wide impact
- There have been wide variations in how the initiative has been implemented across the sector resulting in different experiences and outcomes for STFs
- The role has brought benefits to former casuals employed as STFs, with many reporting greater job security, recognition of professional academic identity, and institutional inclusion than they previously had as casuals
- Many of the positions do not provide employment pathways out of the teaching-intensive role
- Satisfactory performance in the role is determined at the institutional level leading STF recruits to perceive themselves as 'not competitive' for academic roles beyond their current institutions
- The teaching-intensive workload has placed greater pressure on the health and personal life of STFs, in some cases undermining initial improvements in job security
- The long-term sustainability of the role is uncertain due to the combination of the teaching-intensive workload and the lack of clear pathways for career progression
- The role reveals a lack of definitional clarity around scholarship and research in the current regulatory environment
- The lack of clarity about the nature of scholarship and research within teaching-intensive work profiles has led to mixed outcomes for teaching and learning quality and student experience
- STFs can be understood as part of a larger tendency across the sector toward academic role specialization and the separation of teaching and research

A Changing Workforce in a Growing Sector

Policy shifts over the previous decade have expanded access to higher education while reducing the level of government funding that universities receive for research. The consequent growth in student numbers placed greater pressure on universities to increase their teaching capacity in an environment of research funding constraint. The short-term outcome was an increase in the number of casual staff employed in teaching. Since 2010, however, industrial agreements and workplace policies began to focus on strategies to reconfigure the workload composition of the traditional teaching-and-research academic staff profile. The result has been the creation of new academic profiles that are heavily teaching oriented with little or no requirement for disciplinary research.

While universities are required by law (under the Higher Education Standards Framework) to demonstrate that 'sustained scholarship informs teaching and learning' in the courses they offer, this requirement can be met at the institutional level without applying to individual academics. The

separation of research and scholarship in the regulatory framework means academics employed in a teaching-focused capacity can also maintain currency within their disciplinary field without undertaking new research. The growth of teaching-focused positions severs the connection that universities have historically defended between the creation and dissemination of knowledge. These changes signal future uncertainty about the role of public institutions and their workforce.

Scholarly Teaching Fellows: Model and Implementation

While the STF role was introduced at a time when the number of teaching-focused permanent staff was growing, the positions maintained a crucial distinction from those roles. The workload for new STF recruits was to be heavily teaching-oriented for the first three years of employment, but STFs were also to be provided with a minimum workload allocation for research or scholarship, a feature that is not always maintained in other types of teaching-focused roles. After three years, the STFs were to have the option of transitioning into a balanced teaching and research role. The STFs were intended to soak up the pool of casual work in their first three years of employment, but they were also designed as a pathway to a secure and balanced position with adequate research provision, and not simply a mechanism to increase the number of teaching-focused academics.

Other key features of the STF role were:

- Eligibility would be restricted to casual and fixed-term academic employees of Australian universities with a minimum of one year's experience
- Applicants would be required to hold a PhD
- The roles would be full-time and continuing
- The teaching workload was to be capped at 70%

Variations in implementation and the impact of the teaching workload on research capacity have led to uncertainty about their future sustainability. To date, the transition mechanism that was originally proposed (conversion into a balanced teaching and research role after three years) applies to only a small number of the roles created across the sector, many of positions advertised have been either part-time or fixed-term, and the cap on the teaching workload is not always observed.

Research Aims and Objectives

This project is a detailed study of the implementation and experience of the Scholarly Teaching Fellow roles for the Office of Learning and Teaching Strategic Project, 'Scholarly Teaching Fellows as a new category of employment in Australian universities.' The research was undertaken between October 2016 and October 2018 and includes 80 extended interviews with key stakeholders across the sector.

The primary aim of this research is to contribute to improved teaching and learning in Australian universities through an evidence-based consensus amongst university stakeholders concerning the development of STF positions. The research aims to:

- Investigate the individual and institutional costs and benefits of STFs
- Identify individual and organizational capabilities developed through the implementation of STFs, including improvements in pedagogical scholarship and student experience
- Understand how STFs interact with and redefine other academic roles
- Identify the extent to which STFs have created an entry-level career pathway in the context of sector renewal pressures
- Develop sector-wide best practice for the development and support of the STFs and their future development

Methodology

The methodology used in this project combines quantitative and qualitative elements, culminating in a case study of the implementation and experience of the STF positions from the interview data.

The data used in this project includes:

- analysis of the national statistical data provided by the Department of Education and Training (DET) on casual and teaching-only appointments as a proportion of the total academic workforce

- detailed analysis of the DET statistical data for a sample of ten universities which undertook either the introduction of STFs or new teaching-focused roles
- analysis of the national statistical data provided by individual universities to the Workplace Gender and Equality Agency (WGEA) on casual, fixed-term and permanent appointments in the university workforce obtained through a special request to the agency
- comparative analysis of the DET and WGEA data following a review of published approaches to estimating the number of casual academic staff
- detailed analysis of a sample of ten enterprise bargaining agreements at universities which undertook either the introduction of STFs or new teaching-focused roles
- analysis of policy documents relating to the creation and development of STFs and teaching-focused appointments
- 80 extended interviews with senior managers, faculty managers and academic staff in STF, teaching-focused and casual roles
- Four focus groups discussing the initial findings of the research with key stakeholders (scheduled for October 2018)

Interview Sample

Interviews were conducted at a selected group of six universities broadly representative of accepted university “types” using the categories Sandstones & Redbricks, Gumtrees, New Universities, Unitechs following Marginson and Considine, 2000). A confidentiality agreement was undertaken with all interviewees that prevents the disclosure of the names of participating universities and staff. We conducted a total of 34 interviews with senior managers, faculty managers and senior staff with a ratio of 18 female and 16 male participants. A total of 46 interviews were undertaken with academics in STF, teaching-focused and casual roles with 29 female and 17 male participants. The distribution of interviews by role and university type is presented in Table 1 below.

University Type	Number of sites	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS BY ROLE					TOTALS by SITE
		Senior Managers	Middle Managers	Senior Staff	STF/EFR	Casual	
New Universities	2	3	7	2	13	2	27
Sandstones & Redbricks	2	2	5	3	14	1	25
Unitechs	1	1	6	0	14	0	21
Gumtrees	1	0	5	0	2	0	7
Total number of sites	6						
TOTALS by ROLE		6	23	5	43	3	80

TABLE 1: INTERVIEW SAMPLE – BY ROLE AND UNIVERSITY TYPE

Findings from the interview data

Analysis of the interview data reveals four key themes across the different stakeholder roles and institutional types that fall into the following categories: career and STF experience, education-focused roles and the transformation of teaching, managing the transformation of academic teaching, and assessing the future prospects of teaching focused roles. Questions about job security, workload pressure, career pathways and the future sustainability of the role were particularly important for STFs. The benefits of the role for improving teaching quality and enhancing the student experience was often offset with uncertainties about the nature of research and scholarship within the STF role and within teaching-focused appointments more broadly. Changes to the traditional academic work profile resulting from the introduction of STFs and other teaching-focused appointments raised questions about the future of the academic workforce and the role of universities in the creation and provision of knowledge. Finally, interviewees reflected on the future of the role, its sustainability and how it might develop over

time with hope and a degree of skepticism. Below we present a small sample of participant responses grouped thematically.

CAREER OPENINGS: STF EXPERIENCE

at the end of all that casual work and finishing my PhD, it's important to have a continuing role. (Female STF, Sandstones & Redbricks).

- the direct words used by the head of the department was "at the moment you're on a train wreck". I was like, yeah, well, that's what happens when I'm working a lot. I mean I clocked up 90 to 110 hours a week. (Male STF, New University)
- a lot of the anxiety for the STFs I know is that there is no transition out of this. You're kind of looking at, well how long can I sustain this kind of workload? (Female STF, Unitech)

TRANSFORMING SCHOLARSHIP AND TEACHING QUALITY: EDUCATION-FOCUSED ROLES?

- If [teaching] continues to be hack work passed on to casuals, teaching scholars, whatever we call them, people who are kind of overworked and underpaid and unrecognized, then we are constantly sending the message and reinforcing the message that research is what matters and not teaching. (Female Senior Manager, New University)
- they're employed because they're supposed to be good at teaching. But you can only do so much within a certain timeframe. Sometimes the breadth of courses that you're expected to teach means that you may be teaching in some area that's a bit outside of your expertise. (Male Faculty Manager, Gumtree)

MANAGING THE TRANSFORMATION IN ACADEMIC TEACHING

- the whole academic labour force is in a state of considerable transformation, and what we're seeing is the disassembling and reassembling of elements of academic work, particularly with the teaching and learning area. (Female Faculty Manager, Unitech)
- I think if you talk to casuals, they say oh well, I wouldn't mind one of those more permanent positions. If you talk to long term academics, they might say, I don't like the fracturing of research from teaching and we should have our best researchers in the classroom. (Female Senior Staff, Sandstones & Redbricks)

ASSESSMENT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

- I do see the teaching focused positions becoming more valued and developing a career pathway because I think that the understanding of the importance of education as core university businesses is changing. (Female Senior Manager, New University)
- I could see how my role could evolve, but the whispers in the corridor say that the role might disappear altogether. (Female STF, Unitech)
- You can't fix the whole system, but it's better having them than not having them. (Male STF, Sandstones & Redbricks)

Conclusion

The research findings show that the outcomes of the initiative have been varied. While the scale has been too small to have a direct impact on casualization, the positions have increased job security, improved recognition of professional academic identity and enhanced institutional inclusion for previous casuals. They have also entailed challenges as the teaching-intensive workload, combined with the lack of clear career pathways, increases pressure on the health and personal life of STFs. The long-term sustainability of the role is uncertain due to the combination of the teaching-intensive workload and the unresolved ambiguities around career progression. The role has revealed sector-wide uncertainty about the definition of scholarly teaching in the new regulatory environment leading to mixed outcomes for teaching and learning quality and student experience. The introduction of the STFs in the context of the broader expansion of teaching-focused appointments has opened up questions about the nexus of research, scholarship and teaching and the future of the traditional, balanced teaching-and-research academic role.