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Redefining Academic Identity in an Evolving Higher Education Landscape

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Keywords

Academic identity; Higher education, Education Focused positions, Teaching, Academic staff

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Introduction

The changing academic role: Evolution of research-intensive academics

Over the greater part of the 20th century, the academic's role in higher education evolved from the traditional Humboldtian model, comprising a union between teaching and research (Pritchard 2004), into one involving three, often unequally weighted, components: discipline-focused research, teaching-related activities and service contributions to the university or broader community. As Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009) point out, these three missions are in a state of constant tension with each other as universities struggle with priority-setting and resource allocation due to economic constraints, the imposition of quality audits, university rankings and the massification of tertiary education. The combined impact of these stressors, which have intensified in the past two decades, has been to shift academic identity in particular directions. In research-intensive universities, this shift has resulted in a rebalancing of the three academic missions, with significantly greater emphasis now placed on research and its output (Bexley, James & Arkoudis 2011).

Since the advent of the 21st century, and across a range of western societies, there has been a broad decrease in government funding of higher education. In many of these countries, the concomitant greater dependence of universities on competitive research grants has generated a bias toward recruitment of academics based on their research reputation, potentially at the expense of teaching quality (Bentley & Kyvik 2012; Menzies & Newson 2007; Norton 2013). While recruitment of research-intensive academics should enhance the nexus between research and teaching, evidence of this is equivocal (Hattie & Marsh 1996; Uz Zaman 2004; Hajdarpasic, Brew & Popenici 2013; Norton, 2013; Figlio & Schapiro, 2017). Nevertheless, there is recognition that exposure to cutting-edge research is an important component of student learning and the overall undergraduate experience (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales 2008).

Adding further weight to the value universities place on research is their increased reliance on income from competitive research grants. In many western democracies, universities have experienced substantial decreases in government funding, and have consequently become increasingly dependent on research funding (Pare 2011), alongside student load and fees from international students. In 2014, international students comprised 25% of Australian higher-education enrolments, making education Australia's third-largest services export and Australia the third-highest provider of international education behind the USA and UK (Department of Industry, Innovation and Science 2016; Marginson 2007). While international students make a major financial contribution to Australian universities, their choice of university is influenced by university rankings, which is determined, among other things, by research performance.

The massification of higher education, resulting from various factors including the uncapping of student load and social-equity initiatives, has increased the number of Australian higher-education providers, the number of local students at university (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales 2008) and the regulatory requirements around education quality (Australian Qualifications Framework Council 2013). The proportion of young people enrolled in a tertiary course in Australia has more than tripled in the past three decades, increasing the student:academic ratio from 13:1 to 20:1 (Coates & Goedegebuure 2012; Emerson & Bird 2013). While these increased ratios affect teaching time and learning environments, the varied background of these students and their diverse learning needs pose further challenges to, and demands on, the academic workforce.

The demands of academia, together with the impacts of macrostructural changes to higher education, have recast the traditional academic role and entrenched notions of academic identity (Probert 2013). Skelton (2012) focused on the nature of academic identity through the lens of "teacher identity" at a research-led university, and coined the phrase "identity struggles" to define a new paradigm, as academics juggle the competing demands of research, life and teaching innovation. Other authors contend that the nature of academic identity is undergoing a massive transformation due to shifts in policy change in higher education (Henkel 2002) and structural changes including the introduction of new divisions of academic labour (Fanghanel 2012). Collectively, these issues call for research into the nature of academic identity, and in particular the career structure and support of education-focused academics, together with recognition and reward for educational innovation, scholarship and leadership.

Enhancing higher-education standards and the need for education-focused academic positions

Over the past decade, there has been an international trend towards establishing benchmarking and improvement in student engagement, and the quality of students' learning and overall higher-education experience. A number of nations have proposed, developed or evaluated policies and frameworks for this, including the United Kingdom (Higher Education Academy 2011; Smith, Deepwell & Shrives 2013), the USA (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry & Kinzie 2014) and Australia (Chalmers, Lee & Walker 2008; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales 2009). Although audits of research excellence have existed in Australian universities for some time (e.g. Excellence in Research for Australia 2012), the introduction of formal audits of teaching quality has forced universities to increase their focus on education quality and the student learning experience (Norton 2013). Further incentive to promote high-quality teaching and learning was offered by the Australian Government via the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, which provided financial rewards to universities that ranked highest in the Graduate Destination Survey, the Course Experience Questionnaire and student retention (Probert 2013). In an era where research excellence is paramount, the need for high-quality teaching has also become an imperative. A consequent conundrum for research-intensive universities is how to achieve the latter in the face of increasing pressures to maintain or increase the former.

A number of Australian universities have addressed the above issue by introducing an education-focused (EF) academic category (Probert, 2013). EF academics differ from their teaching and research (TR) colleagues due to expectations that they will demonstrate leadership through teaching excellence, implement and evaluate pedagogical innovation and, through these activities, engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Such EF positions contrast with teaching-only (TO) or teaching-intensive (TI) academic positions, which are often characterised by heavy and repetitive teaching loads, and which may be seen as some sort of punishment for an academic's poor or lower-than-expected research output in their scholarly discipline (Leisyte, Enders & de Boer 2009). Heavy teaching workloads consequently leave little time for scholarly research, which has the potential to affect incumbents' prospects for promotion (Probert 2013).

In 2010, Monash University, in Melbourne, Victoria, introduced an EF academic category, with a focus on teaching innovation, educational leadership and pedagogical research. As with similar positions offered internationally, the position has defined education-specific criteria for promotion and career progression (Probert 2013). At some institutions, these promotional criteria include a requirement that EF academics apply for teaching and learning grants through external funding bodies (MacKenzie, Bell, Bohan, Brown, Burke, Cogdell & Tierney 2010).

Given an almost doubling in the number of Australian academics employed in teaching-specific roles (whether as teaching-specialist, TO, TI or EF) over the period 2009-2012, the creation of this new academic category is likely to have widespread implications for higher education. For example, at commencement of this study, only one other Australian university had an equivalent EF academic category. Since 2011, at least 19 other Australian universities have instituted EF (or similar) appointments, and more are likely to follow (Probert 2013). Similarly, universities in the UK and Canada have implemented comparable positions, referred to as teaching-focused, teaching-intensive or teaching-specialist (Probert 2013). Indeed, the number of teaching-only academic staff (including casual/sessional teaching staff) in Australia has increased by 68% since 1996 (Department of Industry, Innovation and Science 2016); in the UK, such staff now comprise about 20% of the academic workforce (Association of University Teachers Research 2005; MacKenzie et al. 2010).

Given that academic identity is often constructed on scholarly discipline and academic freedom (Henkel 2005), transitioning from discipline-based research to SoTL may cast academics undergoing the transition into some sort of liminal space, one requiring deep reflection (Simmons, Abrahamson, Deshler, Kensington-Miller, Manarin, Morón-García, Oliver & Renc-Roe 2013), a rebalancing of priorities and the forging of novel collegial endeavours. Such a transition also has considerable potential to affect an individual's self-esteem and sense of identity. As Yiljoki and Ursin (2013) contended, identities are not fixed, but are constantly changing, and thus a better understanding of the process of changing identity may frame the change in a positive rather than negative manner. Billot (2010) noted that there is often poor alignment between institutional expectations and the support offered to academics. If institutions can identify causes of frustrations and improve support structures, they can facilitate the development of a more positive academic identity. As a result, identities are likely to more closely align with the institutional reality (Winter 2009), and therefore help meet the objectives of the organisation.

Despite the large proportion of staff dedicated to teaching-specific appointments, the perceptions of the academic identity of EF (or equivalent) academics appears to be under-researched. While Kelly, Nesbit and Oliver (2012) analysed the reflections of two academics as they transitioned from STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) to SoTL, they did not investigate the additional experiences associated with a change in academic classification. Furthermore, uncertainty remains about the longer-term status of the positions, particularly in terms of a defined academic identity (Feather 2016) and expectations around scholarly output. We believe that this study is timely, as it explores the personal experiences of bioscience academics at a research-intensive Australian university as they transitioned from a traditional TR to an EF academic position.

Methods

Study participants (n=9) had a doctorate in a bioscience discipline, had recently (with the past two years) moved from a TR to an EF position and were academics teaching in two life-sciences faculties (Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, and Faculty of Science) at Monash University. The participants represented less than 5% of all academics in these faculties, but 53% of EF academics in their departments. It is thus likely that the perceptions of EF academics reported in this study are representative of other EF academics in their departments. The group comprised two males and seven females; this reflects the gender distribution of EF staff in the two faculties. Three participants were early-career academics (less than five years in the role); the other

six were established academics. Participant age range was 30 to 58 years. Most participants had been at the top of their academic level for a number of years but had not been able to apply for, or had not been successful in gaining, promotion due to an inability to fulfil research-based promotion criteria.

Written reflective narratives, essentially autobiographical in nature, were used as the basis to describe the personal experiences and responses of participants as they transitioned to EF academic positions. Narratives have been shown to have considerable value in research (Jasper 2005). The narrative essays were written independently but aimed to shed light on three broad questions:

(1) Why did you apply for an EF academic position?
(2) What were the opportunities and benefits of transitioning from a traditional TR position to an EF academic position?
(3) Do you have any concerns regarding this new type of appointment?

Participants wrote reflectively, openly sharing their feelings, personal experiences and concerns in a manner that was facilitated through an anonymous approach to analysis. To build narrative knowledge, each participant read every other de-identified essay (Jasper 2005). This enabled identification of common themes, which were subsequently agreed upon as a group, and increased the accuracy of analysis by having a more thorough examination of each narrative from multiple perspectives. Narrative knowledge uses the particular experiences of one situation to create a link from the personal nature of reflective writing to findings that are more widely applicable and disseminated publicly (Charon 2001). NVivo 9 software was used to determine the frequency of each theme within and across the narratives. The analysis was performed by one investigator and validated independently by two others. Data was expressed as a percentage of total essays; that is, the number of essays identifying a particular theme compared to the total number of essays written. As participants voluntarily provided consent through the provision of their own anonymous narratives, ethics approval was not required.

Main findings

Analysis of the three guided questions revealed a set of 22 themes. The frequencies of each theme are presented in Figures 1-3. In addition, a brief discussion of each is included below.

(1) Why did you apply for an EF academic position?

All participants conveyed a passion for teaching as the primary motivation for becoming EF (Figure 1). For example, participants commented about how much they "enjoyed the thrill of giving a fabulous lecture", and that the "most satisfying memories from [their] time in research revolved around the time spent interacting with students". Participants wrote about the fulfilment of seeing the "light switch" moment as students understood a concept, and commented that "the time spent interacting with students was the aspect of [their] work that [they] loved most".

Thus, when choosing to move from a TR position, many participants considered that they were "following a career path that interested [them] and one that [they were] good at". These participants felt that they were already undertaking an EF-type academic position before its formal introduction, and that the transition more accurately reflected what they were actually doing. Others expressed the transition as a conscious decision to move away from discipline-based research for a range of reasons, including decreased interest in research, often combined with

family or greater job insecurity (Figure 1). For example, one participant compared themselves to their PhD student: "While my PhD student was dreaming of running her own lab, I was dreaming of teaching!"

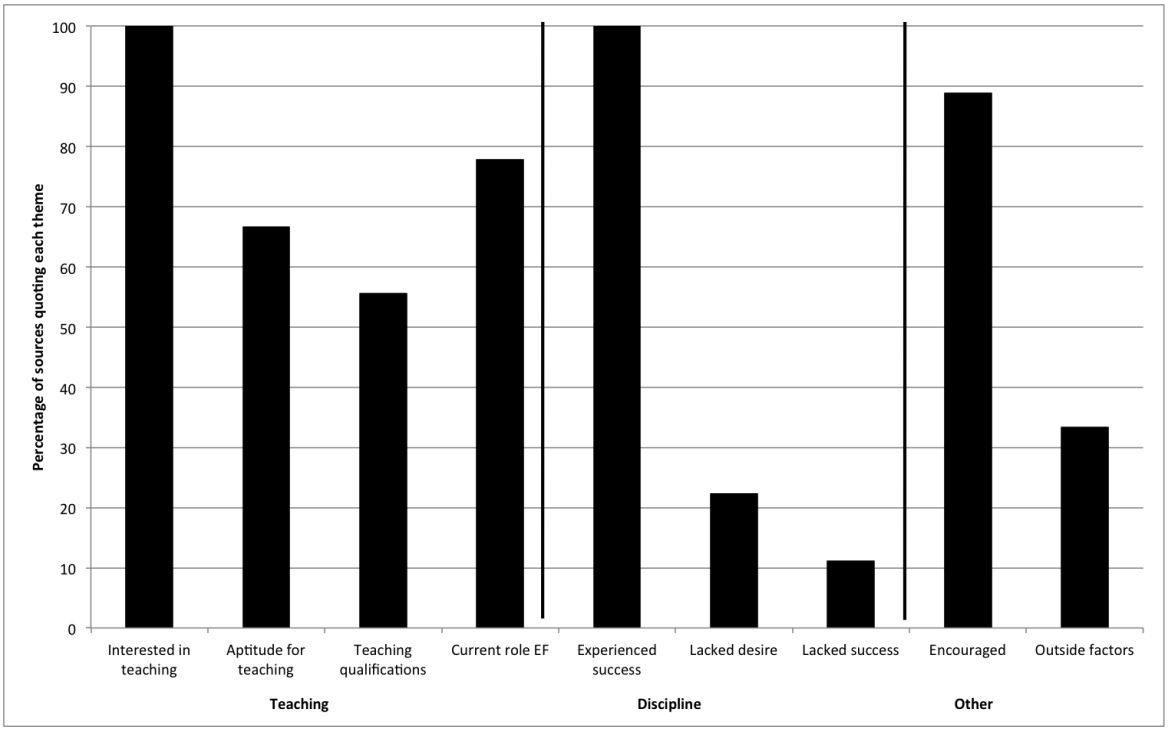

Figure 1. Participants' reasons for moving to an EF academic position

Reasons for becoming EF fell into three broad categories – teaching, discipline and other –each comprising several themes. In "teaching", themes were an "interest in teaching", a perceived "aptitude for teaching", holding a "teaching qualification" (tertiary and/or secondary) and being in a "role that was essentially education-focused". The "disclipine" category refers to the writer's discipline-based research field. Themes were "success in the research field", a "lack of desire" to do discipline-based research and a "lack of, or perceived lack of, success" in the discipline research area. Themes in the third category, "other", were "encouraged", which was defined as encouragement by other EF staff and by other colleagues/supervisors, and "outside factors", which included a perceived lack of job security in research, and/or work-life balance.

Most participants had strong confidence in their teaching skills, with some contrasting this to a lack of self-confidence in their discipline research. Many acknowledged that they received unsolicited positive feedback from students, and some had received formal teaching awards. Five of the participants had undertaken some type of formal teaching qualification prior to their transition to EF (e.g. Diploma of Education or Graduate Certificate in Higher Education), demonstrating their interest in, and commitment to, enhancing their teaching capability.

In their narratives, all participants referred in some way to their bioscience research career. Eight

out of nine participants wrote that they had experienced success in research, with only one participant expressing feelings of under-performance in discipline-based research as a factor in their taking up an EF position. This contrasts with the perception that similar positions (particularly the previous teaching-only positions) are taken by staff who have been inactive in research. In fact, one participant wrote that they "didn't choose to teach because [they were] not productive in their discipline research, but rather chose to become EF because [they] loved teaching". It became apparent that participants made the decision to take up an EF position because they genuinely enjoyed education and were interested in exploring or enhancing SoTL. For example, one participant wrote that they "enjoyed SoTL far more than lab-based research", and another wrote that discipline-based research "didn't excite [them]...in contrast, educational research did!" There was no evidence of regret about abandoning discipline research in any of the narratives. Three participants described having a lack of passion for laboratory research, noting that the EF positions offered a better fit for their chosen career trajectory. Indeed, one participant wrote:

> *I have come to the realisation that I was never destined for a career as a research scientist and that being an EF academic fits with my skills and interests.*

Seven participants commented that they had transitioned to an EF position because they had been encouraged to do so by supervisors and were reassured of their decision by colleagues who were also intending to apply for such positions. It was clear from the narratives that becoming an EF academic had strengthened the formation of communities of like-minded academics, and that this made them feel supported. For example, one participant wrote:

> *I am heartened to know that I am part of a collective – a group of other EF academics who have a similar mindset to me, who are not failed researchers but rather great teachers and who can offer support and guidance in this journey...a group that will help me to develop into the best EF staff member that I can be!*

(2) What were the opportunities and benefits of transitioning from a traditional TR position to an EF academic position?

Participants commented that they thought transitioning to an EF position would improve networking opportunities, improve their self-confidence as an academic and increase their potential for promotion and leadership opportunities (Figure 2). Participants also noted that the EF academic category would allow them to justify time spent undertaking SoTL activities (e.g. attending and presenting at education conferences). Finally, there was a strong feeling among participants that universities needed quality teaching staff and that EF positions would provide an avenue to attract and retain these people (Figure 2). For example, one participant who had spent considerable time observing colleagues' lectures noted that there was a great range of lecturing proficiencies. This participant concluded that "a lecturer's effectiveness had nothing to do with academic level or research output, but much more to do with a passion for teaching and an enthusiasm to engage and involve students in the learning process".

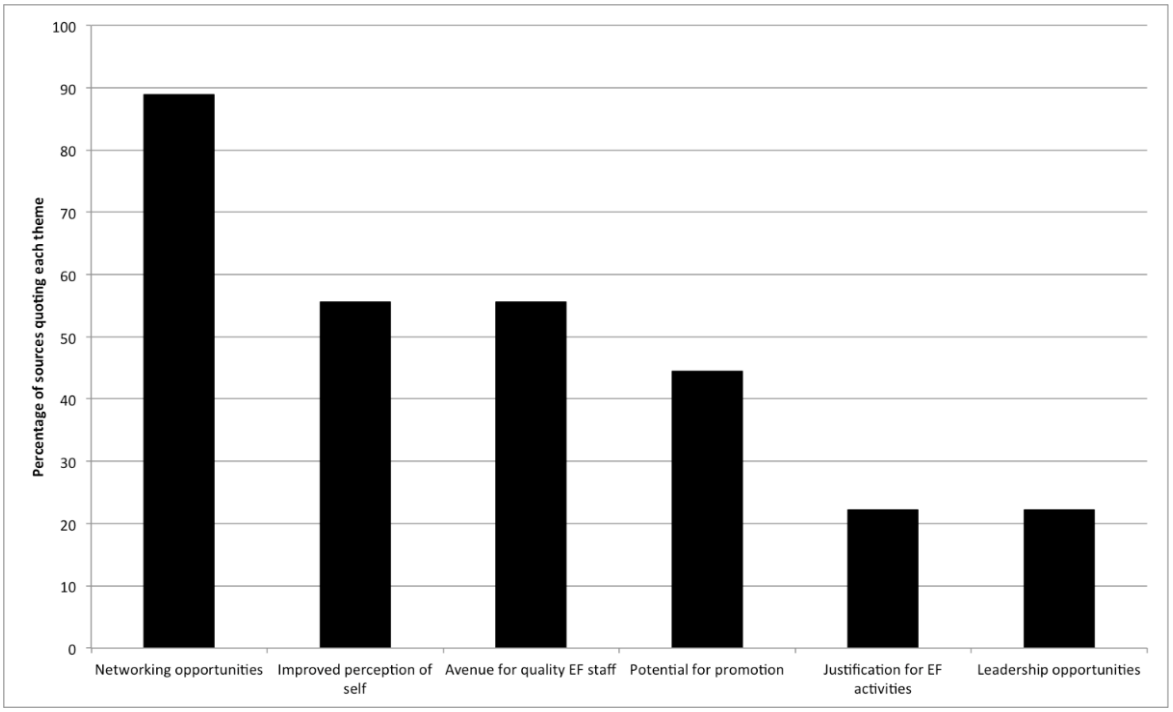

Figure 2: Perceived or actual benefits associated with becoming an EF academic
Perceived or actual benefits of becoming EF included "networking opportunities" with other EF staff both within the university and externally, an "improved perception of self", an "avenue for quality EF staff to be attracted to the university and pursue careers in academia", an increased "potential for promotion" due to the role and the "official" description of the role being more closely aligned, feeling "justified in pursuing EF activities" and increased "leadership opportunities", both within and external to their home departments

A common theme was that becoming EF removed previous feelings of "inadequacy and "guilt" about being less active as a researcher, and the associated sense of a lack of self-worth. For example, one staff member wrote:

> *[Becoming EF] has removed the nagging anxiety about my diminished research output and allows me to feel positive about developing and improving teaching and learning within my Department/School/Faculty.*

Similarly, another participant expressed their feelings of improved self-worth:

> *I could see the potential to engage in research again [through SoTL], to publish and attend conferences – all those attributes and roles I associated with being a successful academic or researcher, and were aspects of my career as a laboratory researcher which I had missed and which were associated with my self-esteem.*

Participants expressed feelings of surprise as they realised that their education research was "of interest to their discipline-based researching colleagues", gave them "new-found confidence as

[they] started to believe in [themselves]", and offered more "credibility to oversee the education programs and provide guidance in curriculum development" in their departments. As a result, there was a sense that the transition to an EF position would provide greater opportunities for leadership, both within their departments and externally.

Five participants made positive remarks about the potential for EF positions to recognise, reward and attract excellent educators to the university. One participant stated that "an EF position must never be the reward for inactivity or a lack of discipline-related research, but rather recognition that a primary role of universities is knowledge transfer and skills acquisition for future scientists". In a similar vein, another wrote, "Students deserve to be taught by people who know how to teach, who understand student needs and who have a desire to be there." Indeed, a thread of the narratives was that some TR colleagues undervalued education and saw teaching as a burden and hindrance to their research, which they valued most. For example, one participant stated that such staff:

> *...put little effort into preparing for lectures and cared very little about their effectiveness as educators. Their passion was research and their dismissal of teaching responsibilities shouldn't have surprised me given the pressures to publish and obtain grant funding.*

The general feeling of participants was that these EF positions provided an avenue for the university to attract and retain high-quality teaching staff. While recognising the importance of maintaining students' exposure to cutting-edge research, participants also thought that these positions had the potential to "lighten the teaching load of researching academics" while also allowing "EF academic staff to invest time in the development and implementation of novel ways of teaching, assessing and engaging students". After all, "without high quality teaching and learning, the university would not be fulfilling its mandate".

Given the above perceived opportunities, transitioning to an EF position appeared to offer some hope to participants about their prospects for promotion, for which many participants had been ineligible for based on traditional academic promotion metrics. For example, one participant wrote:

> *I feel much more positive about my career because I can see a pathway for progression and promotion. I plan to apply for promotion next year, something I would not consider if I was still a traditional researching academic.*

(3) Do you have any concerns regarding this new type of appointment?

Participants commented that they thought being EF would increase their overall workload (Figure 3). They also worried about how such positions would be perceived by TR colleagues and what the longer-term strategy of the university might be regarding EF positions (Figure 3). Many participants felt that there was insufficient collegial or financial support for EF roles, and further, believed that they lacked certain skills to assist their progress in SoTL research. As stated previously, some participants were optimistic about their promotion opportunities, while others remained concerned about their ability to fulfil EF promotion criteria (Figure 3).

Seven participants raised concerns regarding increased workloads associated with the transition to an EF position. This concern fell under two themes: issues surrounding increased teaching responsibilities and lack of time for SoTL. For example, one participant stated that their TR colleagues now "consider it to be the responsibility [of EF staff] to pick up the [teaching

administration] slack". There was a feeling that "there was pressure to take on excessively high teaching loads which may negatively impact the true potential of these positions". Indeed, with increased teaching loads, little time would be available for engagement in SoTL, as highlighted by comments regarding "a personal struggle to find time to...even read [the SoTL] literature", let alone engage in educational research. This was summarised by one participant:

> *A significant challenge for me is trying to find time to do education research while continuing to carry my normal teaching and administration load. The small amount of education research that I have done so far has shown me how time consuming this research is. The competitive nature of publishing in education journals means that time is needed to become cognisant with the literature and the methodology.*

This leads into another major area of concern, with five participants stating that they felt ill-equipped for SoTL research. For example, one participant wrote:

> *As part of being an "EF" academic I need to perform education-based research. This is fine in theory, but in practice I have no idea what to do or how to do it.*

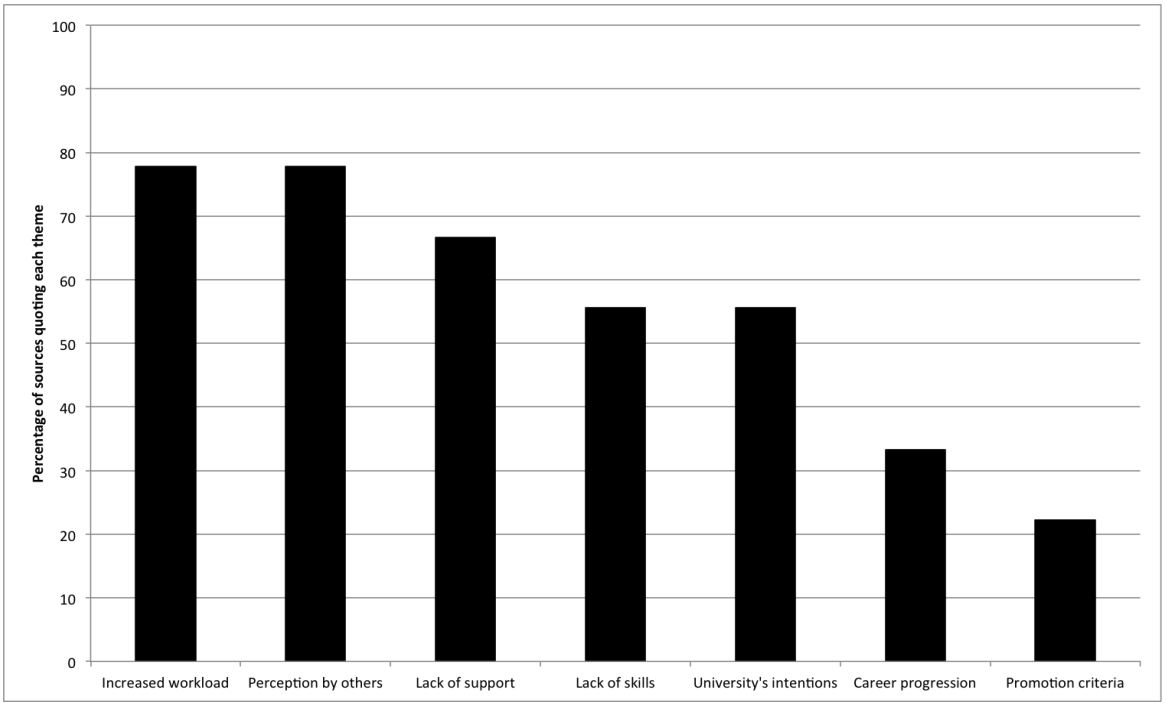

Figure 3. Participants' areas of concern about becoming an EF academic
Concerns about becoming EF fell into seven themes including "increased workload", "perception by others", especially other researchers, a "lack of support", either collegial or financial, a "lack of skills" to engage fully in their new role, scepticism regarding the "university's intentions" for EF staff, the impact an EF position would have on "career progression" and concerns over the "promotion criteria" and their ability to fulfil them.

Participants stated that they were "concerned about their limited experience with education research", and felt "some trepidation about publishing in education journals". They also feared that that they wouldn't "be able to grasp and adapt to a new way of thinking and the methods required for education research". This was despite participants' admitting that their previous experience in discipline-based research had meant that "the foundations of research methodology [were] familiar". Nevertheless, it was clear that SoTL was daunting to some participants. While the university has since implemented a number of initiatives to assist in this area, many of these were not available when this study began. Consequently, six participants reported feelings of isolation and a lack of direction from supervisors or more-senior academic staff. For example, one participant wrote:

> *I still feel as though I am a beginner in this field. It has made me realise how isolated EF staff in our school are. Our superiors expect us to be able to undertake education research but have no understanding of the challenge this is for all of us.*

Similarly, other participants stated that they had "no support to achieve these [research] objectives", and that they felt isolated without the support of being "part of an academic team", as had been the case when they were in discipline-based research.

Participants also raised concerns about how these positions would be perceived by students and other academics. Some participants felt that the EF positions lacked status and recognition. One participant decided not to tell students that they had moved to an EF position for fear of disappointing them. The participant wrote:

> *I felt that a subset of students would be happy to be taught by academics with sound knowledge of learning and teaching practice, but some students might be disappointed that their teachers are not actively researching in the area they teach.*

Participants expressed feelings of being "second-class academics" and having failed in the eyes of their peers. One participant recalled situations where "colleagues would make comments to the effect that teaching was riding off the back of research, implying that EF academics did not contribute much value to the university". Although such remarks may have not been intentionally malicious, they indicated a lack of understanding regarding the EF positions and reinforced feelings of inadequacy for some participants. For example, another participant commented:

> *EF positions seemed to be attached to the stigma of a failed researcher. I wasn't that! I still had potential to make a career for myself in research if I wanted to. But the problem was, I didn't want to. Did that make me a failed researcher, or merely someone who chose a different career path?*

In a similar vein, another participant wrote:

> *I chose to…follow a career path that interested me and one that I was good at. I have a passion and an intuitive understanding of teaching and learning that many of my colleagues do not.*

In relation to the suspected (or real) lack of parity of esteem between EF and TR roles, one

participant stated:

> *One of the major challenges of being an EF academic will be to have these roles accepted and respected by the university community.*

This was of particular interest to six participants, who mentioned their concern about the university's long-term plans regarding EF positions, and that such positions might simply be "a way to remove research-inactive staff from the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) evaluation and then permanently remove staff that were not wanted". Others worried that EF positions could eventually "become part of the 'publish or perish' climate" that is pervasive in academia.

Having transitioned to an EF position, almost all participants were concerned that this would make it very difficult, if not impossible, to return to a TR position. Furthermore, as the university was taking a leading role in developing EF appointments, participants were worried that transitioning to such positions would limit their ability to be employed elsewhere.

Discussion

We believe that this study is timely, as it synthesises the personal narratives of bioscience academics at a research-intensive Australian university as they transitioned from a TR to an EF academic position. The stressors and factors driving universities to increase their international ranking has seen a shift in reward and recognition towards discipline-specific research output, which has the potential to stifle educational innovation and affect teaching quality. Together with increasing student enrolments and legislated standards for university quality audits, EF and similar positions have become more embedded and widespread in higher-education systems, both in Australia and internationally. As this study shows, a shift in academic classification has considerable capacity to disrupt the traditional notion of academic identity. On the one hand, our EF participants raised concerns about increased workloads and how fellow TR academics would perceive the positions. Conversely, they felt positive about the improved networking opportunities, increased freedom to engage in SoTL and increased self-esteem brought about by their transition to EF. Importantly, the lack of mentorship and guidance experienced by participants during their transition to EF calls for the development of scaffolding and resources to ameliorate these issues, and also allow EF academics to further develop and reach their full potential as educational innovators and practitioners.

The impact of the introduction of EF positions is both topical and relevant in today's tertiary-education climate. In their personal reflective narratives about moving from TR to SoTL, Kelly, Nesbit and Oliver (2012) reported on the range of difficulties they encountered. These included feelings of uncertainty about scholarship, largely due to the different academic language and analytical stance required for SoTL research. While their are pertinent to current changes in higher education, their study focused solely on the change in research focus and was restricted to the experiences of only two academics. A comprehensive discussion paper commissioned by the Australian Government (Probert 2013) to investigate the implications of EF staff in Australian universities analysed national data on appointments and policy documents and interviewed senior managers, but did not examine how the introduction of such positions affected the appointees. To our knowledge, this research study is the first to explore how academic staff experience the early stages of transition to an EF appointment.

The implementation of EF academic positions reflects both the need for high quality teaching and learning and its increasing importance to universities, including research-intensive institutions such as Monash. These EF (and similar) positions have become more important in the past decade due to a number of factors, including increased enrolments and subsequent participation of learners from more-diverse backgrounds. Additionally, EF positions offer a range of benefits to the university, departments and individual academics that would not otherwise be possible. For example, the active participation of EF academics in SoTL is likely to have far-reaching positive effects for students. Not only are EF academics more likely to use innovative teaching practices and to benefit academically from engagement in SoTL (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccione 2011), but they can pass these benefits forward to students through enhanced teaching and assessment practices (Boose & Hutchings 2016).

Despite the potential benefits of EF positions, areas of concern for institutions and individuals relate to employment conditions, EF academics' status compared to that of TR colleagues and the exact mechanisms for career progression (Chalmers 2011). Bexley, Arkoudis and James (2013, p.398) recommended that "appropriate career pathways and promotion opportunities for teaching-specialist academic work should be ubiquitous across the sector". The initial scepticism of our study participants regarding opportunities for promotion is not surprising, given the (then) novelty of these positions and lack of precedent for promotion at the time these narratives were written. Prior to the introduction of EF positions, participants who had reached the top of their academic level were unable to be promoted due to their inability to fulfil the research-related criteria for TR academics. In contrast, EF academics are now assessed for promotion using criteria that include scholarly output, educational leadership and innovation and the quality of their teaching practice. Importantly, application of these criteria has enabled eight participants to be promoted since the study commenced.

While EF positions have the potential to improve the student experience and alleviate the teaching burden of TR colleagues, overloading EF academics with high teaching loads is likely to hamper their ability to innovate and undertake SoTL. Furthermore, the danger of moving to a two-tiered model of EF and TR academics may lessen students' exposure to the cutting-edge research conducted by TR academics, many of whom are high-quality educators (Figlio & Schapiro 2017). Students value being taught by academics who are actively involved in research (Hajdarpasic, Brew & Popenici 2013) and the importance of this nexus should not be underestimated, despite the lip-service paid to teaching by some TR academics (Zimmerman 2015). A suitable balance in the proportions of TR and EF academics is required, with EF academics providing guidance and support to their TR colleagues on up-to-date tools and methodologies to enhance students' learning and skills development.

The difficulties and barriers experienced by academics transitioning from discipline-based to SoTL research appear to have both ontological and epistemological elements, which together define their sense of academic identity. On the one hand, in their transition to EF, many academics experience a major intellectual shift that requires them to learn a new attitude and belief system (epistemologic), and the considerable effort required to construct a SoTL identity may generate doubt about their decision to become an EF academic (Simmons et al. 2013). On the other hand, the need to develop new skills in SoTL language, methodologies and technologies (ontologic), together with difficulties in finding sufficient time to undertake this new form of research, may cause transitioning EF academics to struggle with feelings of inadequacy and ignorance (Kelly,

Nesbit & Oliver 2012). The similar concerns and insecurities reported by participants in this study point to these concerns as major issues, and call for the development of resources and training to better prepare and support EF academics if they are to succeed and progress in the role.

Participants' sense of isolation and lack of guidance or mentorship in their position aligns with the findings of Bennett et al. (2015), who documented feelings of being overwhelmed and academically isolated as SoTL scholars sitting outside disciplinary groupings. While a sense of academic isolation has been reported for discipline-based academics (Cawyer & Friedrich 1998), it is likely to be more acute for EF academics given that they undertake work (and research) that is considered by some fellow academics to be of less value than discipline research. The need for mentorship, particularly in transitioning from discipline-based research to SoTL, is obvious, but one that may be difficult to address. Nevertheless, as part of a broader educational strategy, our university has instituted a range of initiatives to support EF academics, including establishment of a university-wide education research group and discipline-related education networks and education-research mentorship schemes. Workshops and research programs have been conducted to educate and inform staff on SoTL processes. Importantly, Monash University has established an Education Academy, which promotes and recognises teaching innovation and excellence through financial support, training, SoTL initiatives and the sharing of good practice. Fellowship underpins the academy structure, allowing outstanding educators to be recognised for their high-quality teaching, educational leadership and scholarly output. As Van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset and Beishuizen (2017) suggest, incorporation of such fellowships into institutional promotion and tenure systems can generate an increased sense of professional status through recognition and reward.

In the absence of dedicated mentors, generating a sense of community among EF academics can alleviate their feelings of isolation and provide support for educational initiatives, including SoTL. Communities of practice promote the regular interaction of people sharing a common interest, allowing them to work together to innovate or make improvements in what they do (Eckert 2006). MacKenzie et al. (2010) have emphasised the importance of SoTL learning communities, particularly where EF academics remain based in their discipline department and continue to teach in the discipline. Such learning communities add value to academic practice in a range of ways, including the sharing of ideas and best practice, enhancement of teaching skills and, importantly, colleagueship and mentorship (Cox 2013). This study emerged from a community of practice formed by the authors, and which was sustained by regular and shared reflection, critique and dialogue, practices that Baron and Corbin (2014) argue are threatened in the current tertiary environment. Many participants commented on the value of the community of practice, and felt that participating in it was instrumental in creating a sense of belonging that counterpointed their feelings of academic isolation, and that provided them with an avenue to engage in educational dialogue, share best practise in bioscience teaching and support one another in SoTL.

Conclusions

The range of stressors and changes sweeping across the higher-education landscape, including greater pressure on academics to increase their research output, together with increasing university enrolments and greater student diversity, mean that EF academic positions have become integral for advancing the quality of teaching and student learning at universities. However, analysis of these reflective narratives, taken across a range of academic levels, experience and life-science

disciplines, reveal a set of common issues related to the transition from TR to EF positions. These include a need for mentorship of EF academics and the provision of opportunities to establish and sustain scholarly communities of practice. Resolution of these issues, together with the building of momentum through appointment of more EF staff, provides potential to establish a more validated academic identity for EF academics.

Additionally, these positions will require acceptance and respect from the broader university community, with EF academics being recognised for their dedication to the continuous improvement of education practice. Departmental, school and faculty leaders need to champion these positions and provide opportunities and support for EF academics to demonstrate leadership in education at institutional, national and international levels. Importantly, validation of this academic identity will be contingent on EF staff demonstrating academic outcomes equivalent to their TR peers, through high-quality pedagogical research and its scholarly dissemination, leading to national and international reputations in higher education.

We believe that EF academics offer considerable potential to develop, implement and evaluate novel ways of teaching and assessing students. By becoming leaders in this area, and guiding future change in their colleagues' pedagogical approach, academics in EF positions are likely to enhance the learning experience for all students.

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