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# Revitalising Higher Education

## Thinking inclusively to enable teaching-focused colleagues to flourish

Are you in a teaching-focused role? Do you have a non-traditional background having moved into Higher Education (HE) from industry or professional practice? Does the idea of not 'fitting in' resonate with you? In this chapter we explore how teaching-focused roles are often in a minority in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), leaving colleagues in these roles feeling misunderstood and/or underrepresented. However, these roles can and do bring a richness to HE and can support the revitalisation of institutions and the sector. This chapter presents key considerations which we propose are necessary for supporting these colleagues to flourish.

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## Introduction

This chapter draws on our reflections as academics in teaching-focused roles in a research-intensive institution in the United Kingdom (UK). Our perspectives are also informed by the career roles that we have previously held in professional practice and industry. Through these experiences and those of a diverse set of colleagues on similar pathways across the sector, we propose that teaching-focused roles can bring an important richness to HE. We suggest that, if harnessed and supported to flourish, the capacity, talents, and ways of working these colleagues bring can support a revitalisation of their institutions and the sector more broadly.

We make the case that teaching-focused colleagues are inherently diverse (McHanwell & Robson 2018), in part because of their learning and student-centred orientation and/or because of their varied and established roles within professional practice or industry (Santoro & Snead 2013; Fung & Gordon 2016). Consequently, as Bennett et al. (2018: 238) suggest, in being 'dual professionals', they can often bring a plethora of varied experiences and professional expertise, alternate perspectives and skill sets, a questioning approach, and a desire to bring about change. In some instances, this richness can have the unintended consequence of positioning them as disrupters who question or even challenge established norms and orthodoxies or whose 'disjointed identities … deviate from socially scripted or institutional trajectories' (Bennett et al. 2018: 280). Their externality can sometimes make colleagues wary, as when these teaching-focused colleagues (in seeking to understand ways of working) ask questions about the way things are done—they can be seen to be challenging the status quo. Teaching-focused colleagues can also be unfamiliar with, or lack experience and/or awareness of, the ways in which things work in HE. This can often unwittingly exacerbate notions of them not 'fitting in' or indeed provoke their own feelings of not 'fitting in' which, in turn, fosters experiences of not being understood, valued and/or considered in the fullest sense (Gretton & Raine 2017; Bennett et al. 2018).

There is much evidence to suggest that, in the complex and turbulent times in which we find ourselves, both locally and globally, and in grappling with the far-reaching and precarious impact of the pandemic, we need to revitalise HE and think differently about the work of HEIs (Corrall 2022; McIntosh & Nutt 2022; British Academy 2022). There may have never been a better and more important time to reconsider and reconceptualise what HE stands for and its place in society, in terms of learning, research, and knowledge creation. The cultures, climate, and ethos within institutions and across the sector will no doubt determine how successful they will be in meeting this challenge head on. Valuing diversity within institutions could be the key to unlocking even greater potential and helping them to be forward-looking, agile, and responsive.

## The Nature of the Teaching-focused Role

The definitions and understandings of teaching-focused roles in UK HE can be complex and can vary depending on the institution and context. These roles can be called different things in different institutions—teaching only, teaching-focused, teaching and scholarship, etc. (Anderson & Mallanaphy 2020; Smith & Walker 2022)—which can itself exacerbate the different ideas of what the role is, what is important, and what is perceived as being essential. These roles represent a large and rapidly increasing share of the academic workforce in the UK. In the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) 2023 report, the 'teaching only' category comprised teaching-focused academics (although it is not clear if this category also included sessional staff). The percentage has steadily increased year-on-year since 2015-2016 when it was 26%, increasing to 35% by 2021/22. In comparison the 'research and teaching' category shrank by 1% between 2020/21 and 2021/22 (HESA 2023). This could be due in part to some or all the following:

- **Focus on Teaching Excellence**
  There has been a growing emphasis on the quality of learning and teaching in HE (Hénard 2010; Patfield et al. 2022) with the advent of the Teaching Excellence Framework (OfS 2023) which has encouraged institutions to recognise the importance of investing in teaching-focused staff who have a strong commitment to developing their pedagogical practices and broader student experience and support (Hulme 2022).

- **Student-centred Education**
  With the evolving landscape in HE, there is a greater recognition of the need to provide student-centred education (Pickering 2021). This includes a greater emphasis on more personalized learning experiences, active learning approaches, and targeted and tailored student support.

- **Teaching Enhancement and Pedagogical Innovation Initiatives**
  Many institutions have created teaching enhancement centres/initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and improve student learning and experience. These initiatives often involve the provision of professional learning and development opportunities and recognition of teaching expertise through accredited awards (Advance HE 2023). In addition, the advancement of technology, the shift to blended delivery models because of the pandemic, and a focus on exploring and developing expertise in terms of pedagogical approaches has also led to the adoption of more innovative teaching methods in HE and the associated recruitment of staff to deliver in these domains.

- **Funding Priorities**
Funding bodies and government initiatives have also played a role in increasing teaching-focused contracts, activities, and offers. Some funding schemes, particularly those orientated towards meeting industry needs, specifically allocate resources to support teaching-focused roles and projects, which in turn has enabled some institutions to create more teaching-focused positions (Cooper et al. 2016).

Whilst the increase in teaching-focused roles in UK HE reflects a developing recognition of the importance of teaching excellence, McHanwell and Robson (2018: pp.10-12) make clear that:

> Recognition and reward of teaching needs to take into account this diversity and ensure an inclusivity of processes to recognise a full range of teaching practices and career roles within institutions and between institutions with very different missions.

Similarly, a survey conducted with teaching-focused academics working in the UK identified that improved understandings across the sector in relation to both the nature of these roles and the planned opportunities for progression and development within them was urgently needed (Smith & Walker 2022). In thinking about how to proactively meet these challenges, in the pursuit of equality of opportunity and being inclusive, we outline three key considerations which are not distinct, but intimately connected and interrelated. We suggest they might prove helpful in thinking about how to support colleagues in these roles to flourish. These are:

- reconceptualising barriers,
- valuing external/alternate perspectives, and
- being meaningfully inclusive.

**Reconceptualising Barriers**

There are barriers associated with teaching-focused roles, which tend to be related to how the roles are valued and their place within institutions (Fung & Gordon 2016; Gretton & Raine 2017). Valuing the diversity of all academic roles is important, as all roles contribute to the overall environment, culture, and success of each institution. Both research and teaching are core components of a university's work and are inextricably linked because, whilst the generation of new knowledge is essential, so is enabling learning about knowledge (old and new), in order to continue its ongoing generation. Teaching and research should therefore be viewed as being reciprocal and 'symbiotic' (British Academy 2022: 7). However, it is well documented that external accountability measures used to determine the success of institutions (e.g. the Research Excellence Framework and international league tables) can create a tension and can be viewed as privileging and encouraging research to be perceived as dominant and/or of most significance to institutions (British Academy 2022: 30).

Valuing research-focused roles is important because research plays a crucial role in advancing knowledge, driving innovation, and pushing the boundaries of all disciplines. Research helps institutions establish their reputation and attract high-quality faculty and students. But equally important is valuing teaching-focused roles, as teaching is the core function of HEIs and the enabler for developing new ideas. Central to this function are educators who can communicate and translate complex ideas in ways that are accessible to learners, enabling them to both develop as individuals and advance their understanding for the wider societal good. Privileging thinking about the relationship between research and teaching-focused roles, and emphasising their symbiotic and reciprocal nature, may need to be revisited and restated in ways that demonstrate more explicitly and expansively their mutual value in the current HE context. Exploring how these roles can work productively in harmony, by developing shared understandings as to their value and complementary nature, urgently needs to be grappled with and reconceptualised.

Another central barrier is achieving a jointly defined or shared understanding of the term scholarship and what constitutes scholarship activities (Fanghanel et al. 2016; Smith & Walker 2022) which are often presented as a key aspect of the teaching-focused role. It seems, that for some, this is bounded purely to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Kim et al. 2021). For others, it can be understood more broadly, or used by institutions as a catch-all term to label a pathway, contract, or role type (to accommodate colleagues, both those with a student and teaching orientation and those who have been recruited based on their industry or professional practice expertise). Therefore, it may be more important to rethink and separate the 'activities' that constitute SoTL from the 'name' of the pathway, contract, or role type and rather focus on developing understandings of the breadth and benefits of expansive articulations of SoTL, for example:

> [SoTL is] an approach that marries scholarly inquiry to any of the intellectual tasks that comprise the work of teaching – designing a course, facilitating classroom activities, trying out new pedagogical ideas, advising, writing student learning outcomes, evaluating programs (Shulman 1998). The scholarship of teaching and learning encompasses a broad set of practices that engage teachers in looking closely and critically at student learning to improve their own courses and programs, and to share insights with other educators who can evaluate and build on their efforts. (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccone 2011: 7)

> SoTL covers concepts as diverse as reflection and inquiry on learning and teaching practices, strategies to enhance teaching and learning, curriculum development, the promotion of research-informed teaching, undergraduate research, and student engagement in disciplinary or SoTL research. (Fanghanel et al. 2016: 8-9)

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It is only through doing this that understandings of what SoTL might 'look like' can be better supported and advocated for in line-management and/or career development or promotion conversations.

Part of the problem may lie in persistent attempts in UK HEIs to define SoTL more narrowly, in an effort to improve the transparency of what it means to support career development and progression or promotion opportunities (Smith & Walker 2022). However, this pursuit of a tighter agreed definition may in fact work to dilute the importance of engaging in the SoTL as an integral practice that should underpin the educational work of all those engaged in HE teaching. It might also serve to dominate and distract the narrative, as the focus becomes all about achieving a single or 'one-size fits all' definition which can become constraining and limiting. It may be more productive to accept that, despite the best of intentions—in just the way that research is diverse and discipline specific— scholarship may also be equally diverse, discipline specific, and therefore futile to narrowly define.

### Valuing External / Alternate Perspectives

The alternate perspectives that those on teaching-focused contracts can bring to their work and HE can often result in these colleagues feeling misunderstood. Such alternate perspectives can result from either their strong student-centred focus or from external perspectives arising from entering HE from industry or professional practice (Santoro & Snead 2013). Valuing the alternate/external perspectives that often characterise teaching-focused colleagues can bring benefits in helping to counter established narratives and ways of working. This is because these staff can be less invested in maintaining the status quo and can question practices, bringing an unfamiliar or outsider perspective. In doing this, they can create dialogic 'third space[s]' which can be 'innovative sites of collaboration and contestation' (Bhabha 2012: 1-2). McIntosh and Nutt (2022: 2) describe third spaces in HE as 'enabl[ing] cultural hybridity, where culture, identities, practices and differences can be explored without an assumed or imposed hierarchy'. Consequently, these spaces can be powerful in encouraging learning environments and communities of practice (Wenger 1998) to develop which can initiate change. They also encourage the adoption of an enquiry or questioning stance (Morgan & Milton 2022) as a valued and integral part of educational academic practice, which in turn can develop pedagogical expertise.

Teaching-focused colleagues, where they transition from professional practice and/or industry into HE, can also be characterised as boundary-crossers who bring alternate and external perspectives to the institutions they serve. The idea of boundary-crossing suggests a way of working that brings together approaches, colleagues and artefacts from varied contexts which can catalyse environments to respond with new or innovative perspectives. This creative, although often disruptive, approach can result in more expansive and novel practices and can be a positive and productive consequence of encouraging and embracing the external viewpoints that those who boundary-cross can bring. As Daly and Milton (2017: 182) note, 'expansive learning environments foster a range of collaborative and dialogic practices, both formal and informal, which support risk-taking and the introduction of critical outsider viewpoints on practice'.

### Being Meaningfully Inclusive

Fundamental to equality of opportunity and the inclusion of staff in teaching-focused roles is the responsibility that sits with all leaders. Key to this is recognising that the responsibility does not solely reside with the head or lead of an institution but is a shared responsibility that needs to be visible and enacted across all devolved leadership roles (e.g. heads of college/faculties and/or heads of schools/sections). This is essential to promote a strong sense of belonging and to counter or eradicate feelings of being marginalised. Influential research in this area has highlighted the impact that 'local leaders ... can have … in promoting or contradicting the message that teaching and education leadership are core to the academic mission and identity' (Fung & Gordon 2016: 20). Consequently, it becomes crucial that leaders engage with and value all staff perspectives when working to build shared understandings about aspects of academic practice. All leaders need to be visibly supportive of the diversity of career contracts/roles in an institution in order to encourage an inclusive culture to become normalised and expected.

In practice this requires leaders to actively engage all staff to contribute their thoughts and perspectives and to proactively work, in all staff interactions, from where each staff member *is* rather than where leaders or the broader community *want or expect them to be*. It is also important to actively explore, resolve or counter any real or perceived barriers in a non-judgemental and supportive way, actively working to create caring and developmental relationships with all staff regardless of their career contract/pathway. Central to adopting such an approach is being responsive to the 'expressed needs' (Noddings 2012: 773) of the individual through considering and working to meet their needs both as a person and in specifically developing their professional practice and expertise. This approach requires the flexibility and understanding to find the most appropriate support and opportunities for staff on different career contacts/ pathways. It demands that leaders listen to all staff and resist making assumptions. It privileges trust and integrity and a commitment to sustained dialogue, focused on building relationships and mutual understanding. It is a conscious commitment and needs to be practiced and developed over time.

## Conclusion

Given the need for all in HE to think differently in order to be prepared and resilient in facing future challenges, we suggest that harnessing the power that comes with diverse staff teams can be helpful. We are not all the same, and that is a good thing. Valuing the diversity and alternate perspectives that teaching-focused staff can often bring, choosing to see their challenges and their questioning approach as being in the spirit of making things better, and embracing their desire to understand the underpinning rationale for established practices, may in fact help institutions move forward.

Creating positive change, especially for learning, teaching, and student experiences, is communicated in everything institutions do—it is not confined or discrete to the lecture theatre; it is pervasive at every level of an institution. Teaching-focused colleagues can often be at the forefront of thinking about this challenge and whilst this chapter is not suggesting that embracing the diversity of teaching-focused colleagues will solve everything, enabling them to flourish might just help HEIs unlock more capacity to meet future challenges and could bring wider benefits for all.

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