

Swimming against the tide: are teaching-only positions truly necessary?

22 April 2013, by Associate Prof. Stijn Dekeyser



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If the issue of teaching-only academic positions, or indeed the future of the academic profession in Australia gets your blood flowing, I highly recommend the Office of Learning and Teaching's 2013 report on [teaching-focused academic appointments in Australian universities](#). According to its Executive Summary: (1) there is an upward trend in teaching-only appointments in Australian universities; (2) there are conflicting reasons why management as well as union (at least in some cases) support this development; and (3) many academics resist the emerging trend.

The conflict between proponents and opponents of teaching-only positions, such as found at Sydney and Deakin universities, can be vocal and lead to industrial action. While in other cases, at Curtin and Edith Cowan universities for example, agreements have been reached by introducing a cap on teaching-only appointments. But are these positions really necessary? Is there an alternative that could bridge the gap between both camps? I believe there may be. But before describing it, we need to define the goals and for that we have to look at the arguments pro and contra. The following lists are not exhaustive, but I do believe they represent most of the arguments.

Arguments **for** teaching-only academic positions:

1. They raise the status of teaching and provide career paths for those who excel at it;
2. They improve productivity by optimising workloads for existing staff;
3. They improve quality by reducing reliance on casual and sessional staff;
4. They improve the ratio of research output versus research-active staff numbers;
5. They improve workload equity for existing staff; and
6. They increase job security for casual and sessional staff.

Arguments **against**:

1. The role of the academic is to inform teaching through scholarly activity;
2. Students at all levels and programs should be exposed to research;
3. Teaching-only positions will lead to two tiers for higher education and ultimately to a return to the pre-Dawkins-reforms system;
4. Rather than the lofty goals of allowing teaching-only staff to use the newly-available time to improve teaching (argument no. 1 in the 'for' list above), such positions usually attract (much) more of the mundane teaching tasks like marking to ease the workload of existing staff (argument no. 2 in the 'for' list above);
5. Unlike the "standard" academic position where one can move between teaching, research and service, teaching-only positions do not provide flexibility;
6. University education should not simply be about training for a job, rather, it must add value to individuals' broader lives; and
7. Deciding where to draw the line between research-active and inactive staff for the purpose of improving the ERA research-to-staff ratio is essentially an arbitrary exercise, and one that can change when ERA rules change.

I do not subscribe to all of the arguments on either side of the debate. But the bottom line for me is that management has reasonable expectations of increasing productivity and achieving better outcomes in both research and teaching, and that academics, who have been shown to harbour a deep commitment to scholarship, would like to be able to do as much research as they have demonstrated capacity for. So I propose an alternative which, to me, achieves some of the most important goals implied by the arguments for while addressing the majority of the arguments against. This alternative utilises academic workload management, so allow me to indulge on a bit of theory first.

There are generally two phases to academic workload management. The first one involves determining the size of component 'envelopes' (i.e. percentages for Teaching, Research, Service, etc). The second phase is often focused only on the Teaching envelope and involves filling that envelope with teaching-related tasks. For the alternative solution I am proposing, we need to concern ourselves only with the first phase.

Relevant research literature shows that there are essentially four 'systems' in place to determine the size of the envelopes:

1. Fixed [Harris, 1993] - commonly 40/40/20 to denote the components of Research, Teaching and Service;
2. Teaching First [Paewai et al., 2007] - assign all teaching duties equitably, the remainder is available for Research and Service;
3. Research First [Burgess, 1996] - assign each individual's Research proportion based on research performance, the remainder is available for Teaching and Service; and
4. Informal [Barrett & Barrett, 2007] - negotiated with supervisor.

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The alternative that I propose is largely based on system number three. In the lead up to the LH Martin Institute [workshop on academic workload management](#), a pilot survey was done to get some data on which of the above four systems is used most. The results suggest that Research First (the basis of the system I'm proposing) is the dominant system in Australia with 71% of respondents indicating its use and only 23% using the Fixed system. Given this encouraging piece of data, here are the critical components necessary to implement the proposed system as an alternative to teaching-only positions:

1. All academics remain in the "standard" academic position description, meaning that they do teaching, research and service. However, the percentages for each of these activities may differ substantially between staff;
2. Research percentages should be dynamic: calculated separately for each academic prior to the start of the academic year and covering only that year;
3. Research percentages are calculated on the basis of research productivity over a small number of previous years;
4. The remainder of workload after subtracting the research and the service percentages is available for teaching;
5. Incentives are put in place for staff on a low research percentage to apply, in competitive rounds, for a one-off increase in research allocation;
6. Similarly, incentives are available for staff to bid on teaching-improvement projects that would offset other teaching-related tasks;
7. Promotion panels must take into account workload percentages in the three areas to assess achievements relative to opportunity; and
8. Performance management must also take into account workload percentages (for goal setting for the year ahead, for example) and should assess whether activities performed over the previous academic year were in line with percentages provided.

The above workload model is already used, by and large, in the Faculty of Sciences at USQ. From the perspective of academic management, it has the advantage of enabling improved productivity and equity as well as increasing accountability. Furthermore, unlike teaching-only positions, no mutual agreement is required provided that the workload model is compatible with the institution's Enterprise Bargaining Agreement. From the perspective of academic staff, the model provides pathways towards more dynamic, specialised activity as well as promotion and performance review without resorting to near-permanent reclassification.

A final note I'd like to make about the proposed alternative is that it does not address the ERA research-to-staff ratio. Firstly, it is unclear to me how that ratio is currently used by government, funding bodies and institutions alike. Focus so far seems to be on the final grade that a discipline receives, and how many 4s and 5s an institution scored overall or how they compared to direct competitors, but not on ratios. Secondly, elaborating on argument no. 7 'against', I believe that drawing the line between research active and inactive staff could be flawed because institutions may decide that their ERA submission could be improved if the line is drawn relative to the performance of other staff. In other words, you could be judged to be research-inactive even if you're regularly publishing mid-quality papers when your colleagues in the research discipline are all publishing in top-quality journals. The optimisation game that we're seeing in the context of ERA submissions does not seem to be a good basis for making long-term workplace decisions.

Stijn will be presenting at the upcoming [Enhancing Academic Workload Management](#) short course in Brisbane on June 13.

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