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## Building the Status of Teaching-Focused Positions as Prestigious Roles to Improve Teaching Quality

Birgit Loch, University of New England, [Birgit.Loch@une.edu.au](mailto:Birgit.Loch@une.edu.au), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6497-9447>

Dell Horey, La Trobe University, [D.Horey@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:D.Horey@latrobe.edu.au), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7594-7694>

Brianna Julien, La Trobe University, [B.Julien@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:B.Julien@latrobe.edu.au), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7531-9989>

Christopher Bridge, La Trobe University, [C.Bridge@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:C.Bridge@latrobe.edu.au), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8438-1725>

Belinda Thompson, La Trobe University, [B.Thompson@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:B.Thompson@latrobe.edu.au)

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## **Building the Status of Teaching-Focused Positions as Prestigious Roles to Improve Teaching Quality**

**Birgit Loch, Dell Horey, Brianna Julien, Christopher Bridge, and Belinda Thompson**

### **Abstract**

Teaching-focused roles provide an ideal opportunity to improve the quality of teaching in higher education. However, such roles are commonly presented as pragmatic solutions for academics not fulfilling research expectations rather than quality improvement interventions. Workload allocations can be shifted to ensure that unproductive researchers are not counted as research-active in university ranking assessments and, at the same time, help balance salary budgets. These measures to address underperforming researchers have shifted focus from the potential to improve teaching quality that teaching-focused roles promised. We argue that a successful implementation of a supported approach for teaching-focused academics can help to foster a culture of excellence in teaching that should deliver career development and associated benefits for those in teaching-focused roles. This paper discusses a considered approach to improving teaching in higher education by supporting teaching-focused roles in an Australian university. Strategies to raise the profile of teaching-focused academics included a high-level champion, a merit-based application process, and a development program. These strategies aimed to address mis-focused perceptions and stigma related to teaching-focused positions and contribute to a culture of excellence in teaching. We put this approach forward as a model for institutions wanting to improve teaching quality, implement or enhance teaching-focused career paths or review existing models.

### **Keywords**

Academic careers, academic workforce, teaching focus, teaching quality

### **Pathways to collaboration**

- This paper discusses a considered approach to improving teaching in higher education by envisaging teaching-focused roles as a quality improvement intervention supported by a merit-based application process, a development program, and a high-level champion
- Future publications to evaluate this approach will draw on focus group data, expressions of interest for teaching-focused roles, and case studies

- Our early work highlights the need for further research on factors contributing to the success of programs that aim to improve the student experience with teaching-focused positions
- A key aim of research into teaching-focused roles must be to introduce sector-wide reporting standards and definitions to facilitate evaluation.

## Introduction

Teaching-focused positions have been a growing feature of the Australian higher education sector for more than two decades and were introduced ostensibly to address a perceived need for improvement in the quality of university teaching (Chalmers, 2011; Probert, 2013). This initiative recognised the value of those academics able to teach others advanced skills. A similar shift in understanding of the importance of higher order skill development was evident in the 2018 review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (Noonan et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, the teaching-focused workforce in higher education in Australia is not always perceived positively. In a seminal paper, Probert (2013) identified conflicting motivations for shifting to teaching-focused roles, such as the rise of international rankings, “overwhelmingly reflective of research strength” (p. 8). This development has led some universities to move underperforming teaching and research academics to teaching-focused positions in an attempt to improve ratings rather than focus on improving teaching quality (Goodman et al., 2023).

No universally accepted definition of teaching-focused academic roles exists in Australia. Role descriptions vary between institutions, although comparison to teaching and research positions and its standard 40:40:20 split across teaching, research, and service, is common. Teaching-focused roles typically have higher teaching workloads and smaller allocations to either education research or scholarship of learning and teaching (SoLT) (Hayford, 2020; Probert & Sachs, 2015).

Nation-wide comparisons regarding teaching-focused roles are limited by the lack of reporting standards relating to definitions and usage. Government reporting in both Australia and the UK is in terms of ‘teaching-only’ positions, a more restrictive term than ‘teaching-focused’. Australia’s lag behind the UK in this area has been attributed to negative perceptions associated with the teaching-focused role and poor promotion prospects (Bennett et al., 2018; Probert, 2013). Nonetheless, Australian university workforce data show that teaching-only full-time equivalent (FTE) staff quadrupled in the decade 2010-2019 (Rogers & Swain, 2021). By 2021, teaching-only academics comprised more than 17 percent in the reported academic teaching workforce data and made up about 8 percent of all full-time and fractional full-time university staff in academic organisational units in Australia (DESE, 2022). In the UK, the

proportion of the academic workforce classified as teaching-only exceeded 25 percent by 2010 (Nyamapfene, 2018) and rose to over 37 percent by 2018/2019 (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021).

We wanted to build a culture of excellence to improve the quality of teaching across the seven STEM and health discipline schools that comprised a ‘college’ in our university. To do this, we aimed to develop teaching-focused roles. In this paper, we describe how we used these roles to improve overall teaching quality and to foster a culture of teaching excellence. In seeking cultural change, we wanted to improve teaching practice beyond those directly chosen for teaching-focused roles, with an anticipated impact that included improved student experience, increased engagement in professional development activity, and increased esteem for teaching practice.

To use teaching-focused roles as a teaching quality intervention, we reframed negative perceptions of these roles by explicitly linking the role to excellence in learning and teaching. In the future, we intend to further investigate the benefits of this approach by undertaking case studies of individual academics to explore the impact on their careers. At this stage, we hope that this paper will lead to discussion about different ways to implement and support academics on teaching-focused tracks.

## **Review of literature**

Several key challenges confronting these roles have been identified in the literature, and we have structured our literature review according to these. In particular, the seminal work of Probert (2013) has retained its relevance as a major reference point. To complement the relatively small number of Australian studies investigating teaching-focused positions in detail, we also explored relevant international literature.

### **Lack of visible career pathways**

In the Australian context, the absence of teaching-focused role models at higher levels is recognized as contributing to lack of visibility of career paths for this group (Bennett et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2023; Mate et al., 2019). Several studies have identified a lack of career pathways for teaching-focused academics, particularly for higher academic levels (Bennett et al., 2018; Mate et al., 2019; Probert, 2013; see also Hubbard et al., 2015, for similarities in the UK context), and a teaching-focused role is sometimes viewed as a “one-way street” (Probert & Sachs, 2015, p. 50) or a “dead end” (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 276).

Institutional policies may reinforce this problem by not keeping pace with the changing workforce, for example, at some institutions, promotion criteria developed for teaching and research roles are still applied to teaching-focused staff (Mate et al., 2019). Even where this is not the case, cynicism remains. As Probert noted a decade ago, “[e]ven when the evidence

does not exist to support it, academic staff generally *believe* that only research really counts when it comes to getting promoted,” (2013, p. 8, italics original). While there is some evidence of promotion success in teaching-focused career tracks, this tends to be at lower levels (Bennett et al., 2018) and dependent on the attitudes of individual heads of department or school (Mate et al., 2019). In particular, female academics in teaching-focused roles still face systemic barriers to progression (Konjarski et al., 2022). Finally, when teaching-focused roles are offered on a temporary basis, the transition (back) to teaching and research is considered unlikely to occur (Bennett et al., 2018; Brennan et al., 2020; Rogers & Swain, 2021). At this stage there is little in the way of data on teaching-focused career pathways in Australia.

While overall gender balance has been observed for teaching-focused cohorts, a breakdown of incumbencies at the various academic levels has revealed a bias in favour of males at higher levels (Bennett et al., 2018), similar to the academic workforce in general (Croucher, 2023). However, at this stage, it is hard to determine whether these higher academic levels are achieved through appointment or promotion.

Currently, teaching-focused roles are determined independently at each institution, making transfer to other institutions, like promotion, uncertain. The establishment of sector-wide uniformity would clearly benefit the teaching-focused workforce (Bennett et al., 2018).

### **Perceptions of value of teaching-focused academics**

The widespread perception in the Australian higher education sector that research activity is valued more highly than teaching exacerbates problems with career pathways for teaching-focused academics (Bennett et al., 2018; Brennan et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2022). Several issues encourage this view. Competition to improve international rankings favours research over teaching in the higher education sector (Probert, 2013), and in a study by Krause (2014), academics were found to construct their identity in terms of research much more than teaching:

Unlike academics’ strong affinity with disciplinary research communities, responses about discipline-based teaching communities suggest that for the most part these are weak or non-existent (p. 16).

Yet this competition creates tension in the workplace, as job satisfaction, particularly for those in teaching-focused roles, appears to be more dependent on departmental culture. In a systematic review of international literature, van Lankveld et al. (2017) found that:

The work environment enhanced teacher identity when it was perceived as collegial and supportive. In these departments, teachers felt part of a team that emphasised the value of teaching and offered opportunities to discuss educational matters with

colleagues...The work environment was experienced as having a constraining impact on identity when teachers perceived their departments to be competitive, hierarchical, lacking in trust, or to value research more than teaching (p. 330; see also Goodman et al., 2023 and Ross et al, 2022, for similar findings in the Australian context).

Inevitably, despite stated intentions, several studies continue to recognise the tendency for teaching-focused roles to be used punitively, where it is researchers deemed to be “under-performing” that are removed from research-active denominators for international ranking calculations (Bennett et al., 2018; Brennan et al., 2020; Probert, 2013).

### **Quantifying teaching excellence**

One of the critical factors impeding the development of teaching-focused roles is the difficulty of defining teaching excellence (Bennett et al., 2018; Hayford, 2020; Ross et al., 2022). The complexity of evaluating teaching in higher education was highlighted in a 2020 systematic review of international literature that synthesised 46 university teaching expertise frameworks, identifying six task areas and 29 sub-tasks relevant to university teachers (van Dijk et al, 2020). These task areas included: teaching and supporting learning; educational design; assessment and feedback; educational leadership and management; educational scholarship and research; and professional development. Standard evaluation measures are typically over-reliant on student satisfaction surveys, the imperfections of which are well-known (Heffernan, 2022), and generally focus on only the first of these task areas.

Peer review of teaching may offer potential for assessing teaching quality (Hayford, 2020), but practical barriers and the lack of any standard replicable approach, means that judgements are likely to be inconsistent and subject to bias.

Teaching award frameworks may provide a measure of teaching excellence. The introduction of the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) by the Australian Government in 1995 led to the establishment of many institutional teaching awards frameworks aligned to the national scheme (Hayford, 2020), but recognition of such awards is not yet uniform (Probert, 2013; see also Nyamapfene, 2018 for a similar finding for the UK). Writing in the South African context, Subbaye (2018) suggested a range of other measures that could be used, including curriculum development, academic professional development, postgraduate supervision, and income generation related to teaching, although these do not necessarily correspond to the six task areas identified in the review by van Dijk and colleagues (2020). Postgraduate supervision may be contentious if there is difficulty in staying abreast of discipline research, which may occur if teaching-focused academics are given no workload allocation for research (Brennan et al., 2020).

### **Diffuse nature of the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoLT)**

In Australia, some institutions require teaching-focused staff to engage in educational research with measurable outputs comparable to discipline research outputs. However, a widespread conception endures amongst higher education staff that educational research is less valued than discipline-based research (Godbold et al., 2022; Mate et al., 2019; see Gansemer-Topf et al., 2023 for similar findings in the United States). There is also evidence that academics with experience in discipline research find the transition to educational research difficult, which may be especially true for STEM academics (Flecknoe et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2022). Writing in the UK context, Hubbard et al. (2015) noted that the “vocabulary and style of pedagogical literature can be quite different than that of science” (p. 6). Reflecting the international experience, Simmons et al. (2021) described the “challenge of ‘competing’ in the SoTL world with those in Education Departments and Teaching and Learning Centres, whose work revolves around education” (p. 68), which has the potential to “affect an individual’s self-esteem and sense of identity” (Flecknoe et al., 2017, p. 5).

Active educational research engagement by teaching-focused academics is not required in all Australian institutions; in some, engagement with other components of SoLT is sufficient to meet requirements. The literature has noted confusion over what engagement with SoLT means in practice. Probert and Sachs observed that there is “relatively little clarity in the definition of what constitutes a scholarly approach” (2015, p. 50), and Hayford stated that there is no sector-wide definition (2020). Nevertheless, the higher education standards in Australia do require university teaching to be informed by scholarship and for teachers to at least be current in discipline research (TEQSA, 2021). How this is achieved is less clear, as is whether the second requirement refers to current developments in the field or essential disciplinary competencies.

### **The value of teaching-focused roles**

Teaching-focused roles can offer benefits to academics who take this path. Brennan et al. (2020) reported that “[f]or some academics, a teaching-only role is appealing due to their passion for teaching and the belief it can provide a better work-life balance than a traditional 40-40-20 position” (p. 18). Others derived satisfaction from being recognised by their departmental peers as teaching experts, as the following testimony from a UK study demonstrates:

Our enthusiasm for understanding learning and teaching makes us an intellectual and practical asset for colleagues whose research dominates their time. We can help them to develop their understanding of pedagogical philosophies and theories, suggest different learning activities, observe their work and act as critical friends or mentors, providing a springboard for their own transformation into self-reflective educators (cited



in Hubbard et al., 2015, p. 5; see also Goodman et al., 2023 and Flecknoe et al., 2017 for similar experiences in the Australian context).

The same study, reporting on the experience of four early-career teaching-focused bioscience academics, suggested that some academics chose a teaching pathway because they had come to recognize that their greater impact was through teaching. One participant commented, "I'm passionate about wildlife conservation and believe that my conservation impact will be greater through developing the capacity of in-country nationals rather than doing my own research" (cited in Hubbard et al., 2015, p. 4). Another academic who had taught research skills in Nigeria reflected that "I realized then that teaching could have as much impact as research" (op. cit., p. 5).

For others, the transition from teaching and research to teaching-focused follows their strengths. Another UK study found that:

...some of the individuals who were transferred into the role actually welcomed their new academic status. This was because they had already made a commitment to teaching, as opposed to research, even before they were transferred. In this case, their transfer to a teaching-only role actually served as tacit institutional recognition of their teacher identity. (Nyamapfene, 2018, p. 152)

One important contributing factor to positive experiences in teaching-focused roles is the formation of a community of teaching-focused academics. In a qualitative synthesis of international literature, van Lankeld et al. (2017) observed that "a *sense of connectedness* to other teachers was described as having a strengthening effect on one's identity as a teacher" (p. 332, italics original). In the Australian context, Flecknoe et al. (2017) likewise found that "[i]n the absence of dedicated mentors, generating a sense of community among [education focused] academics can alleviate their feelings of isolation and provide support for educational initiatives, including SoTL" (p. 15). Also in Australia, Ross et al. (2022) surmised that for STEM academics experiencing negative departmental attitudes towards teaching focus, "[b]eing part of a community may override the discipline as being essential in forming a new academic identity" (p. 14). From findings such as these, Whitton, Parr & Choate (2022) urge that "[c]ollaborative professional learning across faculties should be a key principle underpinning a program that seeks to build educational research knowledge and skills in higher education" (p. 13).

The consensus of the literature appears to be that the absence of career scripts and other scaffolding can be at least partly overcome through fostering cross-disciplinary communities of practice of teaching-focused academics.



## **Research gaps**

The evaluation of teaching-focused roles will remain a crucial research activity for as long as their function and design remain contested and without cross-sectoral consensus. Areas for further research identified by the literature include the need for deeper investigation into teaching-focused academic identity (Flecknoe et al., 2017), as well as the experience of academics who have transitioned from teaching and research positions to teaching-focused roles (Rogers & Swain, 2021). Probert's call from 2013 for "further research at the institutional level on innovative and strategic approaches to the use of teaching focused appointments to improve teaching and learning" (p. 41) appears to be as valid as ever.

In this paper, we introduce the approach we took in using teaching-focused roles to improve teaching practice and enable cultural change. This was part of a broader program of work, some of which has been published elsewhere (Bridge et al., 2022; Loch et al., 2021) or is in preparation. As stated above, the anticipated impact of the program was improved student experience, increased engagement in professional development activities, and increased esteem for teaching practice. The implementation of supported and prestigious teaching-focused roles aimed to enhance the status of these academics and influence the broader teaching faculty. This paper reports shorter and longer-term impacts of this strategy in terms of esteem and engagement.

## **Teaching-focused roles at La Trobe University**

### **Context**

La Trobe University (LTU) is a multi-campus university, with a large urban campus in the north of Melbourne (approx. 30,000 students) and campuses in regional locations (approx. 8,000 students). LTU, a member of the Innovative Research Universities network, was founded to broaden participation in higher education, and has high numbers of non-traditional students, including first in family to attend university and students with low socio-economic status.

At the time of introduction of the teaching-focused model, LTU had two large faculties called colleges: the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce and the College of Science, Health and Engineering (SHE). The College of SHE was composed of seven teaching schools and 19 departments, with a total of around 1200 academic and professional staff. Schools and departments within SHE largely operated as silos. There was limited opportunity for discussion about learning and teaching, and practice sharing was uncommon (Loch et al., 2021). Herbert and van der Laan (2021) have also pointed to the discipline boundaries and assumptions influencing teaching professional development practices that exist in Australian universities.

The LTU 2018-2022 Strategic Plan included the goal to deliver a consistently high-quality experience for all students, through in part, "engaged" staff who will be supported by

professional learning opportunities, sharing of good practice, and “collegial approaches to scholarly curriculum improvement” (La Trobe University, 2017b, p. 12). The academic promotions policy was to be updated to “ensure that all aspects of academic work are recognised and rewarded” (op. cit., p. 12).

Teaching-focused positions provided a clear way to improve teaching quality in line with the Strategic Plan. While these roles were initially introduced at LTU in 2007, and despite their early high-level support, subsequent changes to university leadership resulted in discontinuation of the initiative, contrary to trends at other universities. The current discussion relates to roles introduced in the 2018 Collective Agreement.

The collective labour agreement defined a teaching-focused academic as “a staff member with no research output expectation” (La Trobe University, 2018, p. 71). Formal workload allocations for teaching-focused academics were a minimum 10 percent service, minimum 10 percent scholarship or research on learning and teaching, and 70 percent teaching, with the remaining 10 percent to be allocated between categories at the discretion of each school. Activities that constituted teaching and scholarship were described in internal policy documents. The collective labour agreement gave academic staff opportunity to agree to be teaching-focused via annual opt-in processes and to choose to revert to their substantive teaching and research role in subsequent workload planning cycles.

The interventions described in this paper were carried out by the Deputy Provost Learning and Teaching (first author, BL) in the College of SHE, and her team, which consisted of two Academic Coordinators (DH, BJ), and professional staff including a Senior Advisor Learning and Teaching (CB), a Senior Officer Learning and Teaching (BT), as well as other support staff at various times for defined projects.

## **Methodology**

While this paper is a report on research in progress, and does not contain detailed analysis of data, we nevertheless felt it was important to anchor our discussion in indicative results, summarised in Table 1. Many of these data are publicly available including: the University’s promotion policies (La Trobe, 2017a); teaching-focused staff’s peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations, identified from database searches; Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowship and AAUT national teaching awards, which were announced publicly; and staff movements reported on LinkedIn. The learning and teaching blog was managed by co-authors (CB, BT) with access to usage analytics, and the teaching-focused community of practice was also chaired (DH, BJ) and coordinated (BT) by co-authors, who were able to provide information concerning regularity of meetings and attendance numbers. Other sources of data required human research ethics approval (granted under application HEC20487),

including de-identified applications for teaching-focused positions, and transcripts from focus groups of teaching-focused staff held mid-2021. In particular, the latter data sets will form the basis of more detailed evaluation in forthcoming publications.

### **Considered approach to implementing teaching-focused roles**

Our approach to implementing and developing teaching-focused roles was intended to address the recognised challenges and to follow best practice as described in the literature above. Our specific approach to the implementation of teaching-focused roles as a means to improving teaching quality comprised three key elements:

- A high-level champion to promote and drive the value and status of teaching-focused positions
- A merit-based application process for transition to a teaching-focused role
- A development program for teaching-focused academics that included a supported community of practice, best practice incentives, and showcase opportunities.

The process of implementing teaching-focused roles and encouraging academics to transition to them was developed by the Deputy Provost Learning and Teaching (DPLT) in collaboration with the College leadership team. Table 1 provides a summary of the approach and its impacts.

A major institutional restructure at the end of 2021, implemented in response to a budgetary crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, brought about the dissolution of the college structure at LTU, including the disestablishment of the Deputy Provost Learning and Teaching position and its associated team. While the teaching-focused positions continued unchanged, the restructure meant the loss of the high-level champion and much of the development program that had been put in place for teaching-focused staff. Therefore, the measured impacts of our approach are divided into short-term (pre-restructure) and longer-term (post-restructure) in Table 1. We now turn to a description of the three key elements of our approach.

**Table 1**

*Prestigious Teaching-Focused Role Strategy Implementation and Impacts*

What was done	What happened	Short-term impact (2019-2021)	Longer-term impact (2022-2023)
<p>High-level champion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Drove implementation of program.</li> <li>•Consistent reference to positions as 'prestigious'.</li> <li>•Active promotion of TF roles.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Esteem</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Policy changes to remove barriers to transition such as potentially negative impacts on career progression.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Esteem</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•University's academic promotion criteria incorporate guidelines for teaching-focused applications with separate set of criteria.</li> </ul>
<p>Merit-based application process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Application process required EOI and evidence of effectiveness, prior discussion with HoD and HoS endorsement.</li> <li>•Teaching philosophy statement and curriculum vitae required.</li> <li>•Appointments approved by College Provost.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•80 TR academics transferred to TF merit-based roles.</li> <li>•All Schools were represented.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Since loss of champion and support capacity:</li> <li>•A significant minority of TF staff have moved to another institution or retired.</li> <li>•Some returned to TR roles.</li> <li>•Application process now School based and variable.</li> </ul>
<p>Developmental program for teaching-focused academics</p>	<p>Needs analysis of teaching-focused academics informed PD program.</p>		
	<p>Supported community of practice (CoP)</p>	<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•CoP meeting every 6 weeks, online via Zoom, for 90 minutes.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•CoP meeting every 12 weeks.</li> <li>•Up to 76 attendees (range 43-76).</li> </ul>
	<p>Best practice incentives</p>	<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Presentations at CoP, seminars and conferences.</li> <li>•Evidence for promotion, fellowship applications.</li> </ul> <p><b>Esteem</b></p> <p><i>Peer-reviewed SoLT publications:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•26 papers identified.</li> <li>•23 authors identified.</li> </ul> <p><i>Conference presentations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•At least 14 identified.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Esteem</b></p> <p><i>Peer-reviewed SoLT publications:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•21 papers identified.</li> <li>•8 authors identified.</li> </ul>
	<p>Showcase and award opportunities</p>	<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Learning and teaching blog with close to 10,000 hits in 2020 and nearly 9,000 in 2021.</li> </ul> <p><b>Esteem</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•HEA fellowships awarded including senior fellowships (La Trobe University, 2020).</li> <li>•At least 4 TFs achieved national teaching awards, including collaborations (Universities Australia, 2023).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Learning and teaching blog hits &gt;100 per week.</li> </ul> <p><b>Esteem</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Focus group evidence of promotions to level D.</li> <li>•National teaching awards (Universities Australia, 2023).</li> </ul>

### **High-level champion to link teaching-focused roles and teaching excellence**

Understanding that teaching-focused roles were critical to improving teaching quality meant that it was crucial to shift perceptions of these roles. Teaching excellence was a key goal for the university, so the positions were badged as “prestigious”, and a rigorous application process was developed.

As the high-level champion, the DPLT drove implementation of the teaching-focused program in 2018, and in discussions with academics and university senior leadership consistently referred to the positions as “prestigious” and available only to excellent teachers. The champion actively promoted teaching-focused roles across a range of fora and reassured academics uncertain about the impact on their career. Policy changes were required to remove barriers to transition related to potentially negative impacts on career progression. The champion advised the Deputy Vice-Chancellors Research and Academic on the revision of the university’s academic promotion criteria to incorporate guidelines for teaching-focused applications with a separate set of criteria. This work built on the earlier, but stalled, efforts of a former Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

### **Merit-based application process**

The application process included the need for submission of an expression of interest (EOI) to transition into a teaching-focused role with evidence of teaching effectiveness, following prior discussion with the relevant Head of Department, and Head of School endorsement. Evidence of teaching effectiveness needed to be in accordance with the La Trobe Teaching Excellence Principles (La Trobe University, 2023b, see Appendix), and include a teaching philosophy statement and curriculum vitae. Suggested forms of evidence included student evaluation scores, peer review of teaching, course-level evaluation of student preparedness and success, employability data and teaching awards. To ensure applicants were suitable, each application was reviewed by the DPLT, taking advice from Heads of School, with recommendations for final approval provided to the College Provost.

Some 80 new teaching-focused staff members transferred from teaching and research roles via this merit-based process, which we believe provides a clear indication of the hoped-for status of these new roles. Preliminary indications from our focus-group transcripts also suggest that teaching-focused staff felt valued in these positions and saw themselves in leadership roles in learning and teaching in their departments and schools.

In the context of post-restructure uncertainty and downsizing, a number of teaching-focused staff have retired or returned to teaching and research, and we are aware through LinkedIn data of several examples of transfers to other institutions, illustrating a possible damping effect of the scaling back of the development program.

### **Development program for teaching-focused academics**

To understand the needs of these staff members, an initial gathering of university-wide teaching-focused staff was organised. Subsequently, the DPLT's team of professional and academic staff implemented the following to encourage cultural change through discussions about teaching practices:

- A supported community of practice to provide a safe forum and to build connections
- Best practice incentives to provide opportunities to develop and collaborate, instilling motivation for change
- Showcase opportunities to promote and develop SoLT engagement

This development program fostered a culture of teaching excellence and facilitated the sustainability of good teaching practices. It also helped to raise the status of teaching-focused academics in the university.

### ***Supported community of practice***

A community of practice model was used to encourage participants to discuss ideas and support each other. In doing so a positive academic identity was reinforced. Participants shared teaching practice issues and career journeys.

Initially the Teaching-focused Community of Practice (CoP) met every 6 weeks, online via Zoom, for 90 minutes. Each meeting included at least one presentation from a teaching-focused academic, updates from the DPLT about learning and teaching activities across the university, opportunity to raise issues, and time for discussion. Members of the DPLT team organised and facilitated the informal meetings, and the DPLT attended meetings when available. The DPLT team was well positioned to identify relevant topics of interest to the group. Further, regular feedback from the group was sought about their needs and expectations. The CoP reported to the DPLT, establishing a direct line of communication, which ensured timely responses to identified needs or issues.

The Teaching-focused CoP was a lively forum for exchanging ideas and reinforcing good practice, especially during the periods of emergency remote teaching during Melbourne's long lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Strong attendance has continued post-restructure, from which point the CoP has been largely self-organised. This is indicative that one of the key aims of our approach, to open the culture of learning and teaching to change at our institution, continues to be realized.

### ***Best practice incentives***

Offers of incentives focusing on best practice in teaching were intended to provide opportunities and motivation for practice change and collaboration, to encourage innovation, and to build the status of teaching-focused positions. Successful achievements arising from these incentives provided measurable and demonstrable evidence of best practice for individuals that were subsequently used in promotion applications.

By offering small grants to teaching-focused staff, the DPLT increased potential to impact learning and teaching and student experiences. To be eligible, project proposals needed to show potential impact on teaching in the Discipline, School, or across a range of multi-disciplinary subjects. These competitive grants were normally up to \$1,000, although larger amounts were available for collaborative projects led by more than one teaching-focused academic. Teaching and research academics were included on project teams. Grants were used to evaluate teaching innovations and to develop new teaching resources. Outcomes of projects were disseminated through the CoP, with some leading to peer-reviewed publications.

Given the potential barriers to publishing educational research faced by STEM discipline academics and the confusion surrounding what constitutes learning and teaching scholarship, outlined above, it was encouraging to see successful engagement in published research and seminar and conference presentations emerging from our cohort of teaching-focused academics (see Table 1). We believe that it is reasonable to assume that the development program helped to foster these outputs. Focus group testimony supports this view, where such outputs have been used in promotion applications.

### ***Showcase and award opportunities***

Building showcase opportunities created forums for a wide range of academics to talk about issues in their teaching practice in an authentic and open way. There was a philosophy of inclusion. University-wide showcases also demonstrated examples of practical problem-solving and reflective teaching practice, and in doing



so, extended the benefits beyond the teaching-focused group to the wider teaching community. Through this process a culture of teaching excellence was built throughout the College and engagement with SoLT was enabled.

Showcase opportunities included twice-yearly learning and teaching events known as 'Subject Week', where all teaching staff could share their practice by presenting on a range of topics that aligned with the College learning and teaching objectives, and the University's strategic goals. These learning and teaching events were actively supported by teaching-focused staff as keen presenters, and through strong attendance. They also attracted teaching and research academics, indicating broader relevance and usefulness in disseminating good teaching practice across the institution.

The experience of presenting teaching practice also raised awareness of scholarship outside the disciplines with which the academics identified. In response to this interest, a community of practice was established specifically to facilitate publishing in SoLT journals, which may also have contributed to publication successes. This College-based community of practice was open to all academics and aimed to address the incongruence that many STEM and Health academics encounter when publishing in the learning and teaching field.

A learning and teaching blog provided an online venue for practice-sharing via interview vignettes displaying learning and teaching innovations and best practice principles. The blog was only accessible for LTU staff, to encourage staff contributions without the need for onerous brand and style checking processes or high media production values. The blog was a well-used resource, especially in the COVID-19 affected years 2020 and 2021, receiving 9,899 and 8,827 views in those years, respectively. Teaching-focused staff also shared in successful HEA fellowship applications and AAUT teaching awards (see Table 1).

In the context of post-restructure uncertainty and downsizing, a number of teaching-focused staff retired or returned to teaching and research. We are aware of several examples from LinkedIn data of transfers to other institutions, illustrating a possible dampening effect of the scaling back of the development program.

Strong attendance for the CoP has continued post-restructure and has become largely self-organised. We see this is as indicative that one of the key aims of our approach, to change the culture of learning and teaching, continues to be realised.

## Discussion

Teaching-focused roles can lead to excellence in teaching when approached as a quality improvement intervention, explicitly linked to such outcomes, and when appropriate support is provided. The development program to address challenges identified in the literature, particularly potential stigma associated with these roles, was effective in fostering a culture of teaching excellence and raising the status of teaching-focused academics.

A high-level champion was critical to promoting the value of teaching-focused positions, as this made it possible to embed potential career pathways in the university. Teaching-focused roles at higher levels through promotion resulted, raising the sense of career possibilities among academics choosing this pathway and helping create greater prestige among the wider academic community. There are also several examples of teaching-focused staff successfully transferring to higher levels at other institutions. The lack of visible career pathways is widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g., Bennett et al., 2018; Mate et al., 2019), however the role of champion identified in this study provides a practical solution to address this issue. Nevertheless, there is scope for further improvement, including support to reach professorial levels.

The merit-based application process for transition to a teaching-focused role overseen by the champion was critical to raising the prestige of these roles by stipulating that only effective teachers would be accepted. This explicit linking of teaching-focused roles to excellence in learning and teaching was important for successfully changing culture. All Schools were represented in the program, ensuring expertise in teaching across all disciplines. Publicly reported institution-wide data showing significant improvement in student feedback scores and in student retention (La Trobe University, 2023a) was in line with internal College-level reporting, where the College represented two thirds of the university's student population. An important impact of our model was the increased awareness of more reliable indicators of teaching excellence beyond student satisfaction scores. There is greater recognition within the university community of the value of presenting teaching practice and innovations, and the value of teaching awards and fellowships. Our study confirms the value of a merit-based application process, as described in other literature (e.g., Whitton, Parr & Choate, 2021).

The development program proved invaluable in supporting teaching-focused academics and enabled them to realise their expertise and value. The practice-sharing opportunities allowed teaching-focused staff to demonstrate high levels of

expertise in various aspects of learning and teaching. Apart from the self-realisation that occurred, these opportunities were appreciated by teaching and research peers. We were unable to identify other studies linking practice-sharing opportunities with esteem for teaching-focused roles, suggesting this may be a novel finding.

Showcasing practice introduced participants to other areas of SoLT, which is broadly interpreted at LTU. Teaching-focused staff were required to devote at least 10 percent of their workload to scholarship, which encouraged dissemination both internally and externally at learning and teaching forums and through publications.

With the support of the central learning and teaching unit, several teaching-focused academics successfully applied for institutional and national teaching awards, and for HEA fellowships. Prior to the development program, the majority had not considered applying or saw no value in them. These successes were important in raising the profile and status of teaching-focused academics at our institution and were widely celebrated across the university including recognition from the highest levels of executive management.

A positive identity for teaching-focused staff and clearer sense of academic identity emerged from the active, multidisciplinary community of practice that was established. Similar results were noted by Simmons et al. (2021), Flecknoe et al. (2017), and van Lankveld et al. (2017). In contrast to the initial experience with teaching-focused roles in 2007 that did not continue when a senior leader departed, the strong sense of community among teaching-focused staff persists at the time of writing despite the organisational restructure at the end of 2021 that saw the disestablishment of the College, the loss of the champion and reduction in capacity to continue supporting all program elements.

Major challenges to exploring the impact of teaching-focused roles, sector-wide, are posed by the lack of available or transparent data around these roles and the absence of consensus on data standards. These gaps limit detailed and comparable assessments of impact. Future consideration should be given to developing appropriate datasets and data items. An important area for future study is exploring the impact of teaching-focused roles on academic career paths and student experience.

## Conclusion

Explicit links between teaching quality and teaching-focused roles can make a real difference to teaching cultures and academic career pathways. In our case this was achieved through the support of a high-level champion, merit-based appointments for teaching-focused roles, and a development program that was needs-based.

Despite its relatively short lifespan, much was learnt from the initiative, and our approach was a success in terms of the benefits achieved in student feedback, staff achievements through promotions and awards, and for the university. Unfortunately, much of the support program was discontinued due to organisational changes driven by the pandemic, underlining the fragility of approaches implemented at higher education institutions. Continuation of the community of practice by teaching-focused academics relies on good will beyond that typically expected of teaching and research staff.

We intend to report in more depth on evaluations of this program, including focus group testimony of teaching-focused staff, and insight into their understanding of teaching excellence and their reasons for applying for the role. We also intend to develop a series of case studies that explore career pathways. We hope that this paper contributes to further discussion about effective implementations of teaching-focused tracks and more clearly links these to improving teaching excellence.

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## **Appendix: The La Trobe Teaching Excellence Principles (La Trobe University, 2023b)**

Our commitment to an outstanding student experience drives our distinctive expectations of our teachers.

Articulated in our teaching excellence principles, these inform learning and assessment design, teaching activity and career development:

- **Passion:** Teaching students in an engaging, motivating, and inspiring way
- **Rigour:** Use a research-informed approach to learning and teaching
- **Relevance:** Real world issues and enhanced student employability addressed through teaching
- **Ethics:** Demonstrates and fosters in ethics of inclusivity, respect, care, responsibility, and collaboration in teaching
- **Effectiveness:** Demonstrates best practice in curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, and feedback
- **Innovation:** Takes a proactive approach to new teaching strategies, methods, and technologies
- **Reflection:** Adopt a critical reflection and continual improvement mindset to teaching.