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'You certainly don't get promoted for just teaching': experiences of education-focused academics in research-intensive universities

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ABSTRACT

Changes in drivers of academic roles within higher education institutions globally have resulted in increased proportions of academics in education focused (EF) posts. International and UK research suggests that EF academics can experience dissatisfaction with career progression and the perceived value of their work, including those in research-intensive universities. Previous UK research was conducted prior to the introduction of the TEF which has altered the landscape. Therefore, it was timely to examine the current experience of EF academics in research-intensive universities through a theoretical lens to understand barriers and facilitators to career progression. This interview-based study used two theoretical frameworks, Feldman and Ng's Framework for Career Mobility, Embeddedness, and Success and Kanter's theory of Power within organisations to explore the experiences of 43 EF academics across 12 research-intensive UK universities. Four contract types were identified, some of which allowed promotion. Three broad themes were derived from the data, including (1) Lack of agreement on the definition of education-focused academic roles, (2) Level of value and appreciation of educational expertise and the impact on education-focused academics, (3) Career development opportunities for education-focused academics. Recommendations to further enhance the experience and career progression for EF academics in research-intensive universities further include; ensuring transparency in recruitment into EF posts as to whether career development is possible within that post, the need to continue the sector-wide discussion on the definition of EF roles that recognises the complexity and diversity of activity and continued work to value and recognise appropriately educational expertise.

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Introduction

The global landscape of Higher Education is constantly changing. Over recent years there have been reductions in governmental funding of higher education resulting in higher reliance on external research income and a focus on attracting student fees (Flavell et al. 2018; Teichler, Arimoto, and

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Cummings 2013). This has contributed to the marketisation of higher education, a drive to enhance productivity from research-active academics, an increase in the number of academics on education-focused (EF) contracts, and pressures to deliver an increased volume of high-quality teaching (Bennett et al. 2018; Flavell et al. 2018; Simmons et al. 2021; Teichler, Arimoto, and Cummings 2013). For the purpose of this study, we describe EF academics as staff whose role focus was education, encompassing 'teaching only' and 'teaching and scholarship' roles.

Alongside these global challenges, in the UK multiple regulatory developments also exist including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Locke 2012; Locke et al. 2016; Taylor and Baines 2012). These have combined to uniquely shape the current profile of academic roles within UK higher education. Regarding REF, there is evidence to suggest a movement of teaching and research-contracted academics onto EF contracts in advance of the REF 2014 to enhance 'research intensity' rankings (Locke et al. 2016). Of particular relevance to mid or senior-level EF academics who often had management role responsibility for student experience, it was hoped that the introduction of the TEF in 2017 would help raise the profile of education in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector (Hulme 2022; Locke et al. 2016). Across the sector in the UK, the proportion of EF academics (categorised by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as 'teaching only') has increased from 10% of the workforce in 2002 (Gretton and Raine 2017), 26% in 2014/15 to 32% in 2020/21 (HESA 2023). The growth in teaching only academics has been greatest in universities expanding their student numbers most (Wolf and Jenkins 2021) and may reflect that 'traditional' workforce profiles need to flex in order to meet the sector's needs, with EF academics having more time devoted to teaching within their role descriptions (McIntosh and Nutt 2022).

According to a survey in the UK, EFs commonly perceive being undervalued by their institutions (Gretton and Raine 2017), and the same is true beyond (Bennett et al. 2018; Harlow et al. 2022; Simmons et al. 2021). Furthermore, in the UK, they also perceive being isolated, having low status and experiencing inconsistent practice, leading to dissatisfaction with their roles. However, they perceive being valued by their students and peers (Gretton and Raine 2017). US-based research noted the benefits of employing EF staff included the ability to deliver high volume high-quality teaching, educational scholarly activity and promotion of evidence-based teaching techniques amongst their non-EF academic peers (Harlow et al. 2022). However, the same research also found evidence of education and educational research being perceived to be of less value than disciplinary research (Harlow et al. 2022), a view echoed by some in the UK (McFarlane 2011) and Australia (Bennett et al. 2018). Furthermore, EF staff from North America and Australia reported that access to resources, including funding and time, to undertake scholarly activity was a limiting factor (Simmons et al. 2021). UK-based research has shown that the value of education within higher education organisations is not always recognised (Cashmore, Cane, and Cane 2013).

Particular challenges exist for EF academics within research-intensive universities. Mixed perceptions of EF roles have been noted in North American and Australian research-intensive universities with a sense amongst EF academics of being impactful educators fulfilled by their roles, but also experiencing a lack of consensus or clarity about the purpose of the roles, inconsistency in roles across an institution, unbalanced workload and resulting considerations of leaving their profession (Bennett et al. 2018; Bentley and Kyvik 2012; Bush 2011; Rawn and Fox 2018). Research-intensive institutions in the UK, including those in the Russell group (24 world-class, research-intensive universities <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/>), have a small, but increasing, proportion of academics on EF contracts (Gretton and Raine 2017; Locke et al. 2016). In the UK, an EF academic may experience dissatisfaction in career progression (Gretton and Raine 2017) and identity (Cashmore, Cane, and Cane 2013; Martin 2012; Smith and Walker 2021; 2022), whilst also noting a strong need for supportive professional development (Draper and Scott 2017) and formal recognition for educational expertise (Nutt and Tidd 2016). These findings are particularly strong in a research-intensive environment (Cashmore, Cane, and Cane 2013; Martin 2012).

Therefore, the picture is mixed with regard to experiences of EF academics and the value of education, but this international research has often focused on staff in STEM disciplines and/or the

scholarship of teaching and learning requirements of these roles. In addition, much of the UK-based research was conducted prior to the introduction of the TEF and when EF pathways were still relatively new. There has been development work to refine and implement policies and processes to recognise and value education expertise in UK higher education institutions (Locke et al. 2016), including in research-intensive universities (Fung and Gordon 2016). There has also been significant work to inform the development of educational aspects of academic career pathways (Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education 2023) and the Career Framework for University Teaching (Graham 2018). However, as noted previously, much of this was conducted prior to TEF and there are still gaps in our understanding of the experiences of EF academics across multiple disciplines within the research-intensive context and recent UK context. Developing a sustainable and satisfying career pathway for EF academics is challenging without a full picture of the experiences of EF academics in their roles and career progression.

Theoretical framework

Two theories underpinned this research. The first was Kanter's theory of Power within organisations which suggests employees feel empowered in their careers when there are opportunities for growth and access to the resources required for their role within their organisation. Without these, employees can feel powerless, potentially reducing productivity and job satisfaction and increasing the risk of burnout (Kanter 1993). Given previous research had highlighted a lack of formal recognition for educational expertise (Nutt and Tidd 2016), this could suggest that there may be a sense of reduced power for academics that are education-focused within an organisation. In our analysis, we adopted this theory to explore how the distribution of formal and informal power within organisations can enhance or limit career progression for education-focused staff and how this influences their perception of their career and their level of empowerment. Previous research in nurse educators showed that higher levels of empowerment were correlated with higher work satisfaction and lower levels of burnout, but to our knowledge, it has not been applied to EF academics more widely (Sarmiento, Laschinger, and Iwasiw 2004).

To supplement Kanter's theory of Power, as there had also been evidence suggesting frustration around career progression, we also used concepts from Feldman and Ng's Framework for Career Mobility, Embeddedness, and Success (Feldman and Ng 2007). Research using this framework has been previously conducted in higher education academics to determine a scale to measure occupational embeddedness (Cummings et al. 2023). Career mobility, embeddedness and success are key for retaining the workforce and given the evidence highlighting dissatisfaction in career progression (Gretton and Raine 2017) and identity (Cashmore, Cane, and Cane 2013; Martin 2012; Smith and Walker 2021; 2022) amongst EF academics this lens was also viewed as key to understanding the situation. The theory of Feldman and Ng considers six perspectives; (1) Structural: the labour market or landscape, (2) Occupational: occupational responsibilities and intensity, (3) Organisational: staffing policies and promotion pathways, (4) Work Group: immediate working group, social capital, task interdependence, (5) Personal life: time demands, work/life conflict and (6) Personality: big 5 personality traits (Feldman and Ng 2007). The combined use of these two theoretical lenses enabled us to explore the combined influence of power and other factors on career mobility, embeddedness and success, that sit either above, or below the influence of the institution in a systematic way. In addition, using the two theoretical frameworks as a lens to further our understanding of the current experiences of EF academics across multiple disciplines within the research-intensive universities would help fill the research gap we had identified.

The aim of this research was to understand the current UK career pathway experience for an education-focused academic within a research-intensive University, regardless of discipline or contract type. By examining this issue through a theoretical lens, we hoped to examine more closely transferable factors which facilitate, or are a barrier to, career progression for education-focused academics in research-intensive universities currently. Specifically, we asked:

- What career pathways are available for EF academics in research-intensive universities participating in this study?
- How do education-focused academics perceive their careers within research-intensive universities?
- What factors enhance or limit career progression for education-focused academics within research-intensive universities?

Materials and methods

Recruitment of participants and data collection through interviews

Participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews via institutional announcements, social media, direct contact and snowballing. Purposeful recruitment focused on achieving a varied sample by institution, gender and grade. The HESA (2020) definition of education-focused academic staff shaped our population definition which was: Academic staff whose focus is education, who work in research-intensive universities, that have either permanent or fixed-term contracts, and are from STEM or Non-STEM disciplines. We have included EF staff on fixed-term contracts due to the steady move towards increased numbers on these types of contracts (Wolf and Jenkins 2021), and therefore they are a group of interest in terms of understanding their experiences. When defining 'research intensive Universities' we chose to include Russell Group Universities plus the University of St Andrews (a non-Russell Group University) as they were one of the funders for this work and are also a research-intensive university. The choice of setting reflected our interest in understanding career trajectories of education-focused academics, working in environments where research is the primary function, as this was a context where specific challenges had been reported (Fung and Gordon 2016).

Forty-six academics expressed an interest in being interviewed for this study. We were unable to schedule an interview with three, meaning 43 were interviewed (See Table 1 for a breakdown of participant demographic information and institution). Interviews were conducted between November 2020 and July 2021 using video conferencing (Microsoft Teams) and lasted between 31 and 88 min, with an average length of 55 min. Data sufficiency was deemed to have been met for the research aims.

Interviews explored participants' work group unit and organisational structure and their role within that. Views on development opportunities and promotion pathways were also captured. Finally, participants were asked for their views of education-focused careers generally within the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. Interview questions and prompts were developed with the theoretical framework in mind e.g. participants were asked about opportunities, networks, information, support and feelings of value (which are parts of Kanter's theory of Power [Kanter 1993]) at the level of the HE sector, Institution, Workgroup etc. (which are parts of Feldman theory of career mobility (Feldman and Ng 2007)). See Table 2 for the interview topic guide.

Interviews were conducted by members of the research team (AC, AL, SB, SP) and were audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised prior to analysis.

Analysis

Initial deductive coding of the anonymised transcripts was conducted using a codebook derived by combining the two theoretical frameworks (see Figure 1), with an additional COVID-19 code added, because of the timeframe of the study. The two frameworks were specifically selected and combined to address the research questions and identify career perceptions around power within organisations (Kanter 1993), career embeddedness, mobility and success (Feldman and Ng 2007). Three coders (AL, SB, SP) coded the transcripts using NVivo software (QSR International 2020). The coders met to discuss the application of the codes to achieve consistency in application.

Table 1. Demographic information of study participants. Vocational professions included Dentistry, Teaching and Medicine.

ID Codes	Gender	Discipline	Level or Grade	Contract type	Institution
ALF20	Female	Arts / Humanities	Associate Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
ALF26	Female	Arts / Humanities	Associate Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
ALF29	Female	Social Science	Associate Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
ALM10	Male	Arts / Humanities	Associate Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
ALM2	Male	Arts / Humanities	Associate Lecturer	Permanent progressible	E
ALM6	Male	STEM	Associate Lecturer	Fixed term	G
ALM8	Male	Social Science	Associate Lecturer	Fixed term	G
ALM9	Male	Arts / Humanities	Associate Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
ALM14	Male	Arts / Humanities	Associate Lecturer	Fixed term	G
APLF2	Female	Social Science	Associate Professor	Permanent Dept need	B
APLF6	Female	Social Science	Associate Professor	Permanent progressible	B
APRM14	Male	STEM	Associate Professor	Permanent progressible	E
DoTF27	Female	Vocational profession	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
LF15	Female	Social Science	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	E
LF16	Female	Arts / Humanities	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	A
LF17	Female	STEM	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	E
LF18	Female	STEM	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	F
LF19	Female	STEM	Lecturer	Permanent Dept need	F
LF21	Female	Arts / Humanities	Lecturer	Fixed term	G
LF22	Female	Social Science	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
LF25	Female	STEM	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	F
LF4	Female	Social Science	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	A
LF5	Female	Social Science	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	A
LF7	Female	Social Science	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	A
LF9	Female	Vocational profession	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	A
LM11	Male	STEM	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
LM5	Male	STEM	Lecturer	Permanent non-progressible	F
LM7	Male	STEM	Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
RF11	Female	Vocational Profession	Reader	Permanent progressible	D
RF28	Female	STEM	Reader	Permanent progressible	F
RM13	Male	STEM	Reader	Permanent progressible	K
SCLF1	Female	Vocational profession	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	A
SNLF24	Female	Social Science	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	G
SNLF3	Female	STEM	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	C
SNLF30	Female	Vocational profession	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	H
SNLF31	Female	Vocational Profession	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	I
SNLF32	Female	Vocational Profession	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	H
SNLF33	Female	Vocational Profession	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	L
SNLF8	Female	Vocational Profession	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	A
SNLM1	Male	Social Science	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	E
SNLM12	Male	STEM	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	J
SNLM3	Male	Social Science	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	E
SNLM4	Male	STEM	Senior Lecturer	Permanent progressible	E

Once coded using the framework, inductive thematic analysis was conducted on the coded data by three of the research teams (AL, SB and SP) and illustrative quotes were selected (Ritchie and Spencer 2002). This was an iterative process with initial subthemes proposed by the three coders. These subthemes and their illustrative quotes were then discussed by the wider research team (AL, SB, SP, AC, LM) where they were further expanded or collapsed into broader overarching themes and subthemes. This was an iterative process that involved cross-checking with the data to systematically clarify gaps, or enhance understanding by checking the context of quotes until consensus was achieved across the research team.

Reflecting our role in the study

This research utilised a social constructivist approach, accepting there are multiple interpretations of reality (Jenkins 2008). The research team brought varying discipline and leadership expertise

Table 2. Interview topic guide.

Perceptions of your current role	
1.	How would you describe the School / Department you work in?
2.	Can you tell me about your role (what is your job title/what do you do)?
3.	Do you feel your work is valued by: your colleagues, your School, or your Institution?
4.	If you were to describe the pros and cons of your role what would they be?
Career pathways	
5.	How long have you had an education-focused role (current role and previous)?
6.	Have you been able to develop your career?
7.	Can you describe your School / Department management structure and where you fit into that?
8.	Do you belong to any institutional-level networks, committees, organisations or groups?
9.	Do you belong to any national or international level networks, committees, organisations or groups?
10.	How did you come to belong to these networks, were you encouraged by anyone (mentor)?
Progression – barriers and enablers	
11.	Have you had/or are you considering a promotion?
12.	What are the promotion processes in your institution?
13.	Do the promotion processes align with your role?
14.	What factors do you think facilitate the promotion of education-focused academics (why and how)?
15.	What factors do you think hinder promotion (why and how)?
16.	What would promotion or career progression mean to you?
General perception of education-focused careers	
17.	What are your thoughts about education-focused academic careers within Higher Education generally?
18.	Has COVID changed your perception of your role, or that of your colleagues, School or Institution?
19.	Is there anything you think is relevant that we haven't covered?

		Kanter's Theory					
		Formal Power	Informal Power	Opportunity structure	Power structure	Proportions structure	Additional codes
Feldman and Ng Framework	Structural perspective		• Connections outside the organisation				• Change in HE landscape • Change in HE contracts • COVID-19
	Occupational perspective	• Job definition					• COVID-19
	Organisational perspective	• Job definition • Recognition • Relevance	• Connections inside the organisation • Cross functional groups	• Opportunity structure	• Information • Support • Resource	• Proportions structure	• COVID-19
	Work Group perspective	• Discretion • Recognition • Relevance	• Connections inside the organisation • Alliance with sponsor • Alliance with peers • Alliance with subordinates	• Opportunity structure	• Information • Support • Resource	• Proportions structure	• COVID-19
	Personal life perspective						• Personal life • COVID-19
	Personality perspective						• Personality • COVID-19

Figure 1. Feldman and Ng's Framework for Career Mobility, Embeddedness, and Success (Feldman and Ng 2007) and Kanter's theory of Power within Organisations (Kanter 1993) were combined within the initial codebook.

including human resources, meaning different perspectives enhanced the synthesis and interpretation of the findings.

The research team took care to reflect on their own experiences as education-focused academics, and how these would shape their understanding of the experiences recounted by study participants. They have been careful to question each other about how they might be bringing their own priorities forward when interpreting the data.

SP made a conscious decision to pursue an education-focused career and changed role and institution several times to move up the career ladder eventually achieving promotion to the professorial

level. SB took up an education focussed role that enabled her to work less than full time whilst bringing up a family. She is now working full time as a senior lecturer and is keen to achieve promotion. AC became an education focussed academic before the pathway was recognised. She has observed a growth in the number of academics working in education-focused roles and the variation in the career pathway across institutions. AL is an education-focused academic that also conducts education research with an interest in retention and wellbeing. LM is a human resources professional working in the Higher Education sector. She has seen changes in the education career pathway and can provide the perspective of how this relates to changes in other academic job families. All education-focused academics in the team have STEMM backgrounds. This diversity of perspectives within the research team, combined with the use of the two relevant theories to provide structure to coding, enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis conducted by reducing bias within coding and interpretation.

Ethical approval

This study gained ethical approval from the School of Medicine, University of St Andrews Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (MD15012), with reciprocal ethical approval from the institutions of the other researchers.

Findings

Findings from this study are presented to address the three research questions posed during the study. Whilst three themes were derived from the reflexive thematic analysis, two of these addressed the final research question and are reported in that section (see Figure 2).

Career pathways of EF staff in research-intensive universities participating in this study

We sought to answer the research question 'What career pathways are available for EF academics in research-intensive universities participating in this study?'. Participants in this study reported being employed via several types of contracts that impacted the career pathway available to them. Types

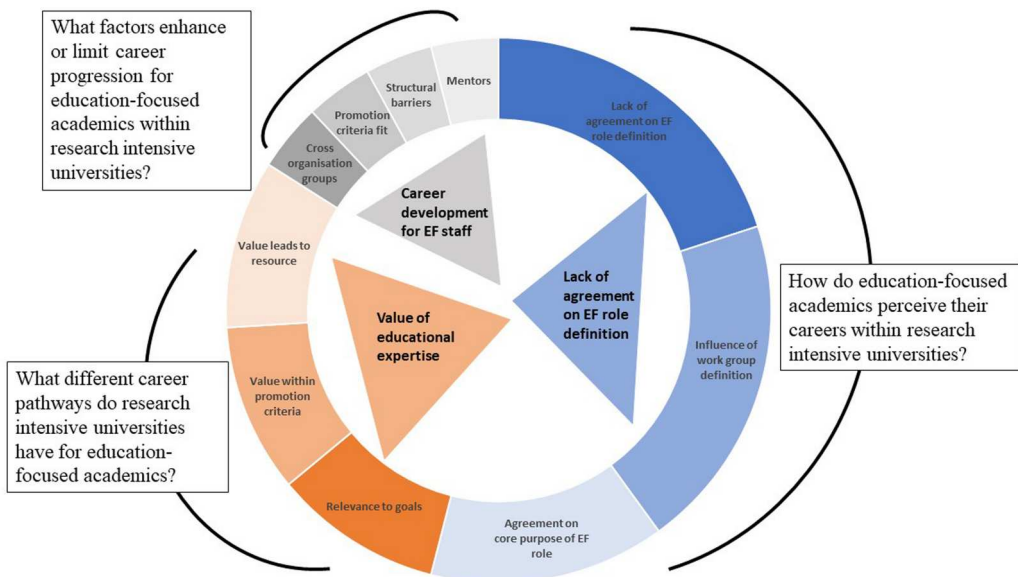


Figure 2. Themes and subthemes derived from the data.

of the contract included (a) permanent progressible, (b) permanent progressible but only if a case was made for department or work group need, (c) permanent non-progressible, and (d) fixed term. The majority of participants (36/43) were on permanent progressible contracts (see Table 1 for frequencies of each contract type within the demographics of the sample).

Perceptions of EF academics about their careers in research-intensive universities

The second research question we aimed to address was 'How do education-focused academics perceive their careers within research intensive universities?'. There was variation between participants with regard to their perceptions of their careers. Underpinning this variation was the sense that, despite the growing numbers of academics on an EF pathway, there was a lack of clarity or agreement on the definition of education-focused academic roles. There were three subthemes within this theme (a) the lack of the definition of the EF role, (b) the influence of work group definition on EF academic experience of their role and (c) the agreement of a core purpose of an EF role.

The lack of a clear definition of EF roles was present within the structural, occupational, organisational and work group perspectives. A consequence of this was no widespread common understanding of EF academic roles and therefore of the EF pathway or EF careers within or between organisations. Within some organisations and work groups the EF track was recognised as an important career pathway, whilst in others it was a position that should be solely focused on teaching delivery.

... I had a conversation with a colleague who joined last year on the e [education]-focus track. And they said, 'Oh, I didn't even know there was an e-focus track. I thought it was just an entry-level job, and that you could move on to T&R straight after'. [LF24]

This latter view was often perceived to be linked to the appointment of EF academics onto fixed-term or non-progressible contracts. When there was a lack of clarity within an organisation some participants welcomed it as providing autonomy, but for others, it was restricting their progression.

... it will give me so much flexibility and so much opportunity to do whatever I want you know, and nobody's really questioning what I'm doing because I'm like, well, I'm saying that this is scholarship, I don't know about you, but I think so, you know, so it gave me opportunities [LF4]

The lack of agreed definition meant that the view of the work group leader as to what an EF role was, had a significant impact on the career experience of an EF academic.

I moved to a very different college and I feel in this college. They treat LTS staff so much better, there's so much more value associated with the post, and you know, time has given to do scholarship, time is- we are encouraged to go and undertake CPD [continued professional development], we're not just considered as teaching what's almost you know, people [inaudible 00:11:06] all the crap that no one else wants to do or people who allow people to- allow the superstars to go and do the rest ... [LF9]

The poorest experience seemed to be related to work groups where the view of the leader was that the sole purpose of an EF academic was to deliver teaching, with examples highlighting where significant external education leadership roles were not celebrated as exemplifying successful careers.

[achieving a senior leadership role which is external to the university] is not really being celebrated or discussed within the school. It's just, like I say, gone under the radar. And that is demotivating in some ways and makes you feel like you lack a sense of belonging somehow or that you shouldn't ... you know, that was tricky. [LF2]

The best experience was in work groups where expertise in education development and leadership was a recognised aspect of an EF role and career.

Whilst there was a perception that there was no agreed *definition* of an EF role, there was agreement that the *core purpose* was enhancing the student learning experience, and enjoyment of that aspect was universally highlighted by all participants [SNLF8].

It is a very humanly satisfying thing to do, to teach other human beings about or to be able to do something. So, I think there will always be people who want to do it. What form that will take, I'm not absolutely sure. [SNLF8]

Education design, leadership and strategy were also noted by many participants, along with education scholarship as being core to EF careers. Fewer participants noted educational research, although for some this was a key component.

Factors influencing career progression for EF academics in research-intensive universities

The third research question we wished to address was ‘What factors enhance or limit career progression for education-focused academics within research intensive universities?’. Participants highlighted the facilitators and barriers to career development and progression. There were two main themes within these facilitators and barriers. The first was the value of educational expertise. The value placed on education and educator expertise was perceived by some to have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The second main theme within facilitators and barriers was career development for EF staff.

The value of educational expertise theme

The level of value and appreciation of educational expertise was raised by many participants as important for the perception of whether progression was feasible on the career pathways available. There were three subthemes within this theme (a) the relevance of educational activity to the goals of the organisation or work group, (b) the value of educational activity within promotion criteria and workloads and (c) the relationship of the value of education to resources.

If there was the relevance of education to the goals of the organisation or work group, many participants noted the work of EF academics was perceived to be of greater value by those around them. At the work group level, work in education was explicitly valued and recognised for some participants, but not for others.

I think I've seen a change very much in you know, the first time we were appointing to a sort of permanent – well, they're always fixed terms so actually the fact they're now permanent roles, but when we started appointing them, people would say, 'Oh, but we could get you know, another research lecturer for the same price and that might be doing this'. but actually now we seem to be much more a bit positive and say, 'Oh, no, no, it's good that we get someone else to take on that role'. so I have seen a change and I think that's quite recent, that's in the last five, six years almost. [RF28]

The work group level recognition was gratifying but some participants noted it did not necessarily lead to tangible benefits such as stable long-term (permanent) contracts or opportunities for progression, meaning no continuation of career pathway was open to them. Lack of job security due to fixed-term contracts was perceived by many to be linked to the value placed on educational activity at a structural, organisational and work group level.

... most of them tend to be- most of them tend to be here on a year or two years contract, three years very max, but you know, covering for sabbatical and so on you know, or absence, and so [inaudible 00:30:24] being as a stepping stone to a teaching and research contract in a full time job somewhere else. [ALM9]

This was a particular challenge for those for whom there had been several sequential fixed-term EF contracts with perceived negative impacts on their personal lives.

I'm about to enter into my sixth year of fixed term contracts and I think that is why I don't feel that value is there because I will not be on a fixed term contract if my work is valued. [LF21]

The value placed on education filtered through to promotion criteria and workload models. It was felt by many participants that education was often perceived by others as low-grade activity, limited to teaching delivery, requiring little expertise and with less prominence compared with excellent research within promotion criteria at higher grades.

I think as a researcher you can get promoted just because of the esteem that your work is having, but as education person I don't think the teaching is held in that much esteem so you have to either go down the management route or not be promoted I think. That's how it feels to me. [SNLM4]

Consequently, teaching delivery was usually given the minimum tariff of time within workload models (often with very little preparation or development time factored in). As EF academics are given very high teaching loads this often meant that a significant majority of their time was spent on activities that would not be helpful during promotion applications.

140 h per semester is quite a lot every teaching week so thinking if the school or the university wants to promote us as someone who's going to be an expert with curriculum or an expert with building curriculum, or an expert with welfare and mental health or advising, giving us ... thinking about ways that we can achieve that during the semester as well. [ALF29]

Further, the inflexible nature of most teaching activities meant that non-teaching time was often in small chunks which were not helpful for activities that required considered thought, or attendance at training events. The consequence was that many participants felt they could not use their work time flexibly to develop themselves and their wider practice and therefore any career pathway progression activity was conducted in their free time and impinged on their personal life and work-life balance, as it the case for LF22 below.

I do do research, but I do it at weekends and evenings. So, kind of my job means that I'm usually baseline exhausted. [LF22]

The level of value placed on education was often perceived to relate to the resource available for education-focused activities at both organisational and work group levels such as support for a conference or external training/committee attendance, meaning for some, support was very limited.

If we don't really have the financial means to do that then it's the institution who wants us to actually have international referees, but don't really allow us to do that, so I think it's something to think about when it comes to the international contacts. [ALF29]

The types of activities supported by resources were perceived to be useful to keep up to date or develop knowledge in their subject area, educational methodologies, educational research and to engage with external networks which were important promotion criteria.

... mean that has done me so much good because it enabled me to make lots of connections with other people who are interested in teaching and who had the experience at different levels and at different types of institutions ... it enabled me to go to conferences and yeah, it was just yeah, I found it really rewarding and all those things helped me in my promotions. [RF11]

Career development for EF staff theme

Career development opportunities were also perceived to be key in progressing their careers for EF academics. There were four subthemes included within this theme (a) membership of cross-organisational groups, (b) promotion criteria fit, (c) structural barriers and (d) mentors.

Being able to work outside of the work group on cross-institutional groups/committees, or external national/international societies provided an opportunity to network and were seen as helpful career development opportunities by many participants. However, other participants noted a critical mass of EF academics within a work group or organisation was felt to be helpful for sharing experiences, developing practice, and having a louder collective voice [LF4] to instigate change.

And also when I started, we were- at the time when I was appointed somewhere, a few other people have been appointed at the same time, so I think we have sort of come on from like three learning and teaching people, we think that we were like wow there's loads of us and now there are three of us that's like four years after and I'm like you know what, now I'm starting to feel like we are a group of people you know, and part of this department, we are having a voice in this department and we are stronger as a group of people you know. [LF4]

Promotion processes for EF academics were usually present within institutions. The relevance of these promotion criteria to the roles being conducted by participants varied. At some institutions promotion criteria for EF academics were viewed as being closely based on Education and Research

(ER) academic track criteria, meaning they did not fully recognise or represent the actuality and diversity of the EF role.

I did feel like I had to carve out a lot of space to do extra stuff that wasn't part of my job to reach all the things that are in the promotion criteria. You certainly don't get promoted for just teaching, or even if you're teaching brilliantly even if you're in the highest scores of the department and consistently getting teaching awards, you're not going to get promoted for that. [SNLM4]

This resulted in participants being unable to fit activities to fulfil promotion criteria into their day-to-day working lives. There seemed to also be variation or lack of transparency over how promotion criteria were applied during the promotion process (possibly due to a lack of clarity over the definition) and this could lead to perceived injustice.

... talking to partners, colleagues, if you look at this list, you know, Joe Bloggs [inaudible 00:25:01], they don't meet the criteria with respect to them and the response is, 'well yeah, they don't but they ticked certain boxes'. So, exactly how the promotion committee evaluate it into more important boxes to tick, I'm not sure. [SNLM1]

Organisations that were moving towards broader promotion criteria were viewed by many as allowing recognition of the significant variation in EF roles with criteria that were more achievable within their workload allocation. Whilst it was felt to be valuable that the EF promotion processes were being adapted, the continual development of promotion processes were, at times, perceived as 'shifting of goalposts'. This made it more challenging for EF academics to understand the criteria and submit an application, but also harder for those supporting the individual in their application to know how best to advise.

So the intention is to recognise the range of things that people do in a lecture type role but they- until we sort of see how it pans out, that means that everyone is a bit in the dark, so the people who are applying are a little bit in the dark, and the people who are supporting them are a little bit in the dark as well ... [RF28]

For those promotion criteria which stipulated educational research rather than subject research or included educational research as a method of showing high-level educational activity, there was debate amongst participants as to whether these were appropriate. For those participants trained in subject areas other than education or social science, engaging in educational research often meant retraining as their previous research expertise was not always transferable. Time and resources to attend such training were not always available at either organisational or work group levels.

... whereas a STEM person, I had no idea what to do, and at the moment I'm trying to get a paper published and I'm really struggling because I don't understand the whole- I've got my background with all these sort of theoretical frameworks, all that sort of stuff, so I'm having to start from scratch and there's again no support, so it's really hard, it's really hard, so I think it's particularly hard for teaching focused STEM people. [RF11]

Educational leadership activity comprised an increasingly significant aspect of an EF academics role as they gained promotion; however, at both work group and organisational levels, there were only a very small number of high-level strategic education roles.

I think it would probably have to wait for the person who at the moment is the sort of the lead for (discipline) education in the school for them to give up the role or move on ... I do feel that's probably sort of core group that are also waiting in line for that. I'm not sure that I'm necessarily in that list. [SCLF1]

This, in effect, resulted in a hidden quota system for EF academic progression prospects and a bottleneck at Senior Lecturer / Reader level that was perceived as less prevalent for ER academics.

... that's another difference between our role and a research focused on which of course I don't think that should be the case. So, we have to apply for promotion only when the roles are available. So, there has been several roles available since I've started this job. But prior to this year, it's always been earmarked for someone else even though the department would never say. [LF19]

Good practice was highlighted by some participants where organisational-level positions were advertised via open calls. One frustration in some open calls however was that there could be a

restriction on the grade of individuals who could apply e.g. only those at the professorial level. Both of these mechanisms were felt to result in EF academic staff operating at high levels within the confines of a lower grade.

Mentors who understood the EF academic track were often viewed as especially important for career development by participants given the lack of agreed definition. Whilst these could be advocates from other pathways, as well as EF academics, participants viewed those who were senior EF academics as being particularly helpful as mentors, and champions of the EF academic pathway due to their level of understanding of the role itself. As the number of senior EF academics increased, it was felt access to such mentors would become easier.

I would say the mentor has probably been the most- from their experience, they're all very aware of what's happening at school and college level so they've been able to say this is good, your skills would align well there, but they're also an education focused lecturer figure, so they- and I think that's the difference, so my line manager is on the research and teaching track rather than the learning and teaching track, so they're less aware, so it's not so much that they're not interested or it's just that they're less familiar with it and I would say that pattern is similar as you move up the levels as well. [LF16]

When participants were asked about their promotion experiences and ambitions, they described the promotion structures, and their situations and experiences relating to them across a broader period of their career, rather than the circumstances that were in place at their institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, three broad and overlapping themes were derived from the data which addressed the research questions, these included; the level of value and appreciation of educational expertise and the impact on EF academics, lack of agreement on the definition of EF academic roles and, career development opportunities for EF academics. There were several subthemes under each theme, and these, along with their relation to the research questions, are shown graphically in [Figure 2](#).

Discussion

This research examined current UK career pathways for EF academics in research-intensive universities through a theoretical framework combining power within organisations (Kanter 1993) and career mobility, embeddedness and success (Feldman and Ng 2007), with a view to understanding factors that facilitated or were barriers to career progression. Major findings of this study included three key points: there was a lack of agreement on the definition of education-focused academic roles, the value and appreciation of educational expertise by others was core to the experience of EF academics, and there were specific factors highlighted as barriers or facilitators for the career development of EF academics.

What career pathways are available for EF academics in research-intensive universities participating in this study?

Our participants reported four contract types, with variation in whether progression was possible and whether they were fixed- or open-term and contract type impacted on career pathways open to them. Participants recognised the increase in the overall number of EF academic contracts in the UK higher education sector (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>). Some participants reported increasing use of EF contracts where promotion was not possible (either short, fixed-term posts, posts defined as non-progressive from the outset, or during the promotion process there was a requirement to justify a 'business need' for the uplift), which accurately reflects the UK picture, where there are increasing numbers of academics teaching on fixed-term contracts, particularly in Russell Group Universities (Wolf and Jenkins 2021). However, other participants noted that organisations had worked hard to create or clarify an EF pathway that provided opportunities for career progression. Globally these two types of EF contract types are described. In the US there are

increasing numbers of career-oriented progressive EF posts with justification for their development including enhancing the student experience, whilst managing increased student numbers (Harlow et al. 2022). In Australia, the terms Teaching Only (TO) or Teaching Intensive (TI) might be used to signpost the distinction between progressible and non-progressible EF posts (Flecknoe et al. 2017) although the confusion in roles and expectations of EF staff is still problematic (Bennett et al. 2018).

Our theoretical framework allowed us to identify challenges to career embeddedness from various perspectives, including organisational and work group (Feldman and Ng 2007). There was a sense that whether an organisation or work group tended to employ EF academics on progressible or non-progressible posts was based on the relevance of education to the organisation or work group perceived goals. If goals were perceived to be very research-oriented, then often there tended to be more non-progressible or fixed-term EF posts. Whilst previous research highlighted that there is a movement towards parity of esteem for education and research activities within research-intensive UK universities, it seems that this parity has not yet been fully achieved (Fung and Gordon 2016; Smith and Walker 2021; 2022). Indeed, some are of the view that the creation of EF pathways could have a negative impact on the status of teaching compared to research (McFarlane 2011). Some of our participants valued the certainty of knowing exactly what teaching they were being asked to deliver with no further expectations that came with fixed-term or non-progressible posts. For others, the lack of potential for career progression was frustrating and several sequential fixed-term contracts provided little job security resulting in a negative impact on personal lives. It seems that best practice would be to alert potential applicants during recruitment to the opportunities (or not) for the career development of a post.

How do education-focused academics perceive their careers within research-intensive universities?

There were variable experiences of career progression amongst our participants. Previous UK-based research often portrayed significant dissatisfaction, particularly within research-intensive organisations (Cashmore, Cane, and Cane 2013; Gretton and Raine 2017; Martin 2012). In our data, many participants reported that they had seen improvement in the provision of career opportunities for EF academics during their working lives.

There was, however, variation between organisations and across disciplines, with participants who had worked at more than one organisation having first-hand experience of contrasts. While there was agreement on the core *purpose* of an EF academic role (to enhance the student learning experience), what seemed to be at the heart of the variance was the lack of a sector-wide agreed *definition* of an EF academic role. Participants highlighted that because there was no agreed definition, then the view of the work group leader had a significant impact on the work allocated to them, potentially resulting in variation within organisations, which is concerning given the universal promotion criteria. The lack of an agreed definition of the role also created challenges when trying to work towards promotion criteria that were not viewed as flexible enough to account for the variation in activity within roles. Where broader promotion criteria had been developed (e.g. criteria that allow applicants to highlight higher-level performance in educational activities that included teaching, but also related aspects of educational expertise, including with reach outside of the organisation), these were often welcomed. This combination of variation in work allocated between work groups within an organisation, and promotion criteria that did not seem relevant to all aspects of an EF role, meant participants frequently reported that their day job left no time to engage with activities that would enhance promotion prospects, paralleling the findings of Simmons et al. (2021) in North America and Bennett et al. (2018) in Australia. This meant they either accepted a lack of promotion, or promotion-related activities encroached on work/life balance as highlighted through the personal life perspective within our theoretical framework (Feldman and Ng 2007). This challenge could be contributing to the increase in wellbeing issues amongst academics (Fontinha, Van Laar, and Easton 2018).

There has been significant previous work in the UK to provide a framework for the recognition of university teaching (Graham 2018; Professional Standards Framework, Advance HE). This work, however, took place prior to the introduction of the TEF. Our current findings suggest that further development of the career pathway for EF academics, including the promotion criteria, is still required, at least in some institutions. In some North American and Australian institutions there are explicitly two tracks within EF academic roles, one progressible and one non-progressible (Simmons et al. 2021), but inconsistencies as to how these are implemented are still reported, so this explicit two-track approach may not resolve the current UK variation in experience (Flecknoe et al. 2017; Harlow et al. 2022; Rawn and Fox 2018). It therefore seems that in the UK there is a need for sector-wide discussion on the definition of EF roles that acknowledges the true complexity and diversity of the activity conducted by EF academics (Smith and Walker 2021; 2022).

What factors enhance or limit career progression for education-focused academics within research-intensive universities?

From our data, increased value of educational expertise unlocks several mechanisms towards supporting career progression through increased power for EF staff within organisations (Kanter 1993). Our participants provided many examples of activities that could exemplify educational expertise, these usually included the use of educational knowledge to enhance or develop student-facing activities such as teaching or support. The mechanisms highlighted by our participants included (a) educational expertise being recognised appropriately within promotion criteria, (b) workload that takes into account more than the minimum time required to deliver or develop teaching and (c) resources and encouragement to support continuing professional development in education and scholarship, including attendance at cross-institutional and external education-related networks. These mechanisms meant participants experienced greater formal and informal power and a sense of control, factors that have been found previously to enhance employee well-being, performance and identity (McIntosh and Nutt 2022; Nielsen et al. 2017). Prior research has noted a shift to more useful methods of recognising and rewarding excellence in education, however, there is still concern that educational activity and the value of pedagogic research in comparison to discipline-focused research remains undervalued in UK higher education (Cashmore, Cane, and Cane 2013; Evans et al. 2021; Gretton and Raine 2017). Our findings provide further incentive for research-intensive higher education institutions to continue to strive to value and recognise the value of educational expertise appropriately for the benefit of the organisations and individual EF academic staff (Nielsen et al. 2017; Rawn and Fox 2018). The metrics for recognising and assessing excellence in education are challenging, but there are potential solutions in broadening criteria and focusing on the strengths and reach an individual has in their role that is useful for organisations to consider (Fung and Gordon 2016; McIntosh and Nutt 2022; Smith and Walker 2021; 2022).

The limited higher-level educational leadership roles (those that are often required for promotion at senior levels), lack of resources or support to engage with external networks to build an external profile or to engage with external mentoring schemes, and reduced access to internal mentors that were sufficiently informed as to the career pathway were all thought to be barriers to career progression for EF academics. Lack of time and resources were noted multiple times and in relation to varying challenges by many participants. Mentors were viewed as useful sources of support and advice and role models of the pathway. Increasing the number of EF academics with high-level positions within a research-intensive university reduces tokenism as identified by Kanter in our theoretical framework (Kanter 1993), but it is recognised that the perceived status of tokens also plays a role in how they are viewed as role models (Stichman, Hassell, and Archbold 2010). Enhancing opportunities for EF academics to gain high-level positions within organisations by appropriately valuing their expertise could benefit the experience of all EF staff within an organisation by reducing isolation and tokenism.

Strength and limitations

We purposefully sampled broadly across any discipline within higher education with a view to enhancing the transferability of our findings. We also developed a focused research aim, and this, combined with our large sample, suggests data sufficiency was reached within our study (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016). The use of theory to scrutinise our data is a further strength of this work, by providing a transparent scaffold for the analysis. The combined theories relating to career progression, mobility and power within organisations developed and validated in multiple other workplace contexts (Feldman and Ng 2007; Kanter 1993) were present within our data. This is suggestive that these theories are likely to be transferable to other contexts.

There are, of course, limitations to our study. Data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when restrictions on movement and social contact were in place (Timeline Coronavirus lockdowns, Institute of Government 2022) and teaching, learning, and assessments had moved predominantly online within UK universities. This resulted in an increased workload for academics who were involved in teaching students. In addition, many institutions put their promotion processes on hold as a result of the pandemic (Greenfield 2021). Despite these rapid changes to the HE landscape, which could time stamp our research to a very specific moment in time, participants in our study, even though directly asked about the impact of COVID-19, were focussing on situations, experiences and structures, occurring outside of the pandemic window.

In addition, the study focused on the experiences of education-focused academics in research-intensive universities, which limits the transferability of the findings to settings that have different missions and goals. Despite our efforts at purposeful sampling, we were unable to recruit anyone at a professorial level to take part in our sample. Less than a third of study participants were male gender, compared to half in the eligible population (HESA 2024). There was also variable representation from institutions within the sample. The reasons for this are unknown, but it may mean that we are missing some perspectives within our sample. We have made efforts to represent all views when reporting our findings.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our findings highlight that there have been encouraging shifts in EF career pathways and experiences within UK research-intensive universities with most introducing specific EF roles and having separate promotion criteria. Recommendations from this study include ensuring transparency during recruitment into EF posts as to whether career development is possible within a post, or not. Our findings suggest that there is still work to be done to embed the value of educational expertise within institutions. This could be signposted by further development and refinement of the promotion criteria so that they explicitly recognise educational expertise. Another recommendation from our study would be to provide appropriate time and resource to support continuing professional development for EF academic staff. Our findings also suggest there is a need for a continued sector-wide discussion on definitions for EF roles that acknowledge the complexity and diversity of the activity encompassed within EF roles. It is hoped that such a definition would enhance the value, recognition, and support of educational expertise appropriately at work group, organisational and sector levels within higher education.

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