

Exploring the Teaching-Only Academic role

- Teaching-only academic roles (TOAs) are increasing in prevalence around the world. This increase in TOA roles is occurring in institutions that privilege research over teaching (Rawn & Fox, 2018).

- TOA roles are typically lacking in security, progression and status. TOAs also experience low perceived value in research intensive universities (Bennett et al., 2018)

- This study aimed to:

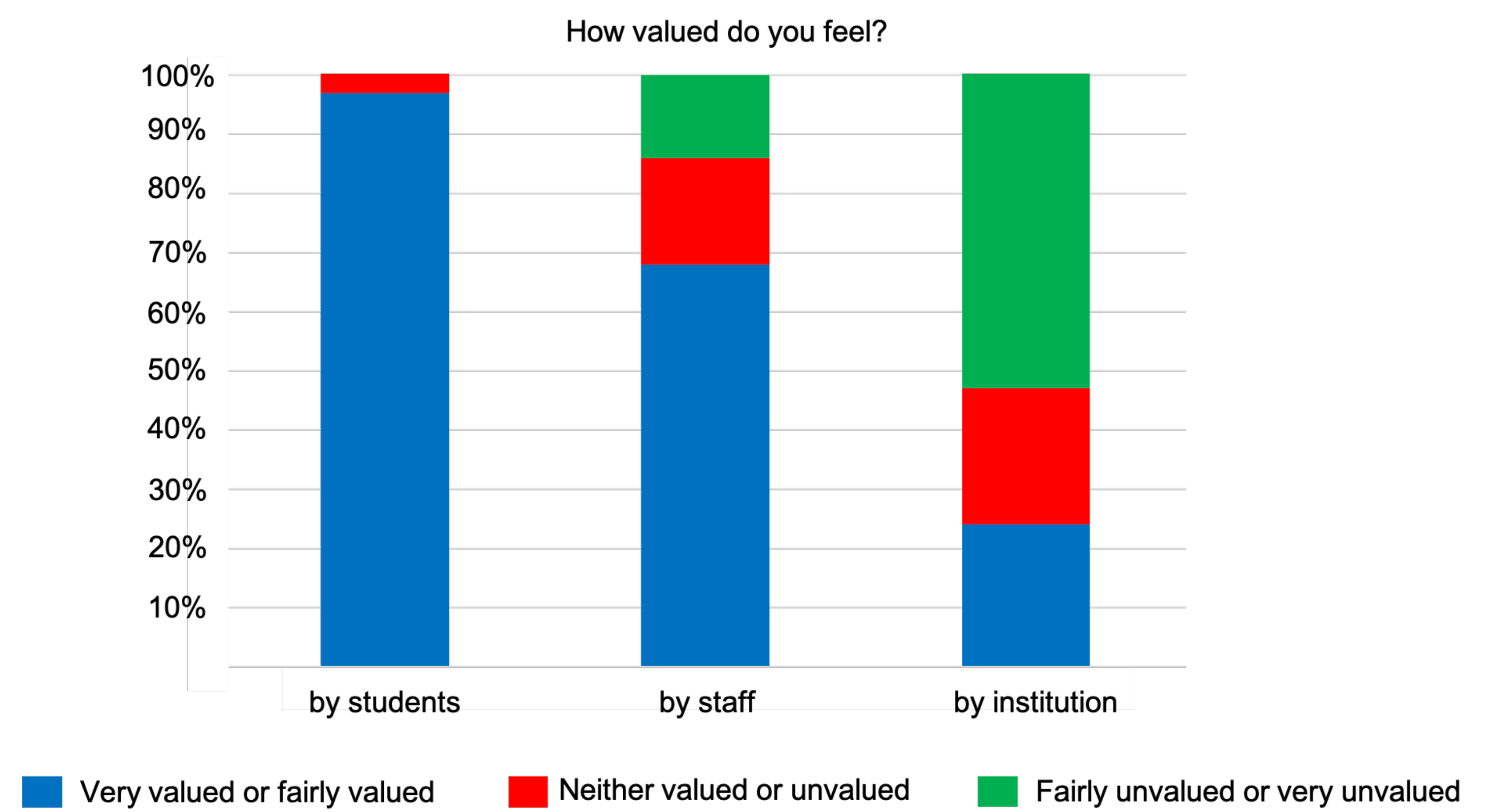
- Broadly scope the TOA role in the Division of Health Sciences.
- Explore how TOAs perceive their role and career development pathways.
- Investigate how TOAs in the Health Sciences define teaching excellence.

- Online Questionnaire sent to TOAs in the Division of Health Sciences.

- Background and demographics; scope of the role; perceptions of role and its progression pathway; recognition and reward of TOAs.

- 29% response rate (i.e. 92 respondents).

“If students really are at the heart of the system - and I believe they are - they deserve the best learning and teaching experience; and that will only be achieved if we value and properly reward those who teach them” – Professor Craig Mahoney in Cashmore et al. (2013, p.2)



Question adapted from Gretton and Raine (2018)

Themes: A snapshot

- Thematic analysis**

- Each question coded, and then patterns identified across questions.
- Five themes were identified, with titles based on quotes from participants.

“The pursuit of teaching excellence”

Captures the factors that TOAs believe contribute to teaching excellence

“Teaching excellence is a pursuit that can be moved towards (but not reached) by valuing your role as an educator, being student centred, seeking and learning from feedback, and continually seeking to be excellent” - Participant 31

“Putting the students first, and offering opportunities for different types of learners to get the most out of the course offered. I cannot force students to engage, but I can offer a safe space and understanding to meet them half way if they are struggling and need assistance” - Participant 19

“Second class”

Captures a perception that TOAs are undervalued by the institution

“...for the most part it is exhausting and frustrating being a Teaching Only Academic. We are constantly exposed to the disparities in the treatment of Teaching Only Academics compared to what are perceived to be the “Real Academics” - the Lecturers through to Professors. There is a massive social, financial and value-based disparity between these roles, and there have been no efforts to meaningfully rectify this, despite it being a known problem, at least in my own Dept” - Participant 7

“I feel like the skills and attitudes required to teach well are not valued as much as research (or clinical) prestige, which results in second-class treatment for TOA’s in terms of resourcing, career progression, and general mana/respect from an institutional perspective...” - Participant 47

“Teaching only, but not only teaching”

Captures the scholarly nature of the TOA role, and participants engagement with research and professional development

“I love teaching, which shows and the students appreciate it and love my teaching practices (supported by teaching evaluations across several papers). However, in the eyes of the University (and to a degree the Department), I’m “only” teaching, not doing research which seems to be the big important thing that is truly valued. My teaching doesn’t contribute to the Department’s or University scores on publications and rankings across the world. I often feel taken for granted and not important as I “teach only.” - Participant 58

“I spend considerable time reading journal articles to ensure my teaching is always up to date. I spend time developing experiments for undergraduate labs. I do not (currently) publish any of this” - Participant 68

“Value at the coalface”

Captures a perception that TOAs value the work that they do, and that they feel valued by students and close colleagues

“I think students value teaching only staff greatly, because we are at “the coal-face” of the courses - we see students routinely in lectures and labs, rather than a fleeting staff member that gives them a couple of lectures and then disengages. Students appreciate continuity, a familiar face, and the comfort of knowing that our job is to truly support and improve their academic experiences at university” - Participant 7

“My supervisor, HOD and Associate HOD Teaching are very supportive and appreciative of all I do and offer thanks on a regular basis” - Participant 55

“A dead-end?”

Captures a perception that there is a lack of progression available to TOAs

“There is no possible career progression for my role. I came to realise that this position is probably a dead-end. A bit hopeless. Unless I find another job, I am stuck” - Participant 13

“I just want to be able to do more, so having more recognition of my abilities, talents, dedication in a more official way within the scaffolding of the university (promotions) may help me be more trusted by others to contribute to curriculum development and planning” - Participant 59

Recommendations for research-intensive universities

Improving the status of teaching:

- Establish a culture that makes the value of teaching more apparent by celebrating excellent teaching and excellent teachers.
- Ensure that TOAs have opportunities to develop in their role (e.g., professional learning).
- Acknowledge that TOAs play a pivotal role in the functioning of the university and the student learning experience.
- Recognise that regardless of title, TOAs are academics – with an academic role function. This will need to be instilled from the institutional level down.

Improving the language used in relation to TOA roles:

- Discontinue the use of “Teaching-Only Academic” as an all-encompassing term.
- Undertake further consultation with individuals in TOA roles to determine a more appropriate term that encompasses this group of faculty.

Creating a sense of community among TOAs:

- Ensure that TOAs are better integrated into mainstream institutional culture by including them in research communities and by connecting TOAs across the university.
- Establish a faculty learning community of TOAs in the Health Sciences or more broadly across the University.

Improving the progression pathways for TOAs:

- A more nuanced approach to promotions is required that accounts for different academic identities among TOAs. This will be important in ensuring that different contributions to the educational mission of the university are equally recognised.
- There should be greater flexibility to transition between career pathways, and more support available to TOAs who desire to make the switch between a teaching-only and research and teaching role.
- If research and teaching are truly regarded as equals, there should be a discussion about the prospect of developing a career pathway for TOAs that extends to a professorial level.

References

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