

NTEU Factsheet

Education-focused Roles: the latest threat to workloads and the teaching-research nexus

The number and regulation of Education-focused roles (EFRs) has emerged as a major point of difference between management and the NTEU. Like the attack on 40:40:20, management's desire to massively increase the number of EFRs represents a major reconfiguration of the academic workforce and should be seen as a very serious threat to staff rights with implications for everyone. In both cases, management wishes to increase the amount of teaching work done by staff, which is a clear way to cut costs. The NTEU is steadfast in defending the centrality of the research-teaching nexus and in arguing that excellent research and excellent teaching go hand in hand.

What are Education-focused roles?

Education-focused roles are academic positions mostly devoted to teaching. Under the current Enterprise Agreement, EFRs have a maximum seventy percent teaching allocation. This makes the teaching allocation for EFRs 75% heavier than for other 'balanced' (40:40:20) academics. Further, the teaching load of an EFR can later be increased to eighty percent if the academic agrees.. An 80% allocation is *double* other academics' teaching load.

Why is the NTEU worried about EFRs?

There are a few big issues:

- **Workloads:** According to our extensive internal research and consultation, **education-focused staff are usually heavily overworked and, as a result, experience significant workplace stress.** Many EFRs are exhausted. Their workloads are unsustainable – a recipe for burnout and relationship and mental health problems. This **must** be fixed.
- **Autonomy:** The current Enterprise Agreement already gives academics the ability to increase their teaching workload as much as they want, but only by choice. Management's new proposal is to appoint people into teaching-heavy positions and then put a five-year limitation on the ability to transition to a balanced role.
- **Progression:** Management want to be able to appoint academics into EFR positions in which they will be stuck for years. Since a strong research record (either in a particular subject area or in the education domain) is necessary to be competitive on the job-market, EFRs will be deprived of many of the career-advancement options they expect and deserve.

Don't EF staff deserve equal esteem to balanced staff?

Absolutely! Our concern is not with colleagues choosing to spend more time on education, but rather with management forcing people into EF roles who might otherwise wish to take a balanced role. Alternative workloads should be chosen freely by the staff member. Education-focused staff are valued members of the university who should never be stigmatized and who should enjoy the same rights as everyone else. This is precisely why the NTEU is seeking to allow maximum flexibility for staff to shift between EF and balanced positions, rather than making this process difficult, and why we believe workloads should be capped at 60%, in line with the [Goodman Report](#) recommendations, not 70%.

What kind of increase in EFRs is management proposing?

At the moment, there are something like 220 full-time-equivalent staff in EFRs. In the last Enterprise Agreement, the NTEU was successful in imposing a limit of 120 advertised full-time equivalent EFR positions. That limit expired in June 2021.¹

Management had been seeking the right to increase EFRs to 30% of the non-casual teaching workforce, but they have recently indicated that they are willing to reduce this to 25% – still a very high proportion. This is a massive, structural transformation of academic work at the university. It would be equivalent to around 650 full-time equivalent staff – more if people are recruited on a part-time basis. Given the likely number of academic jobs to be advertised over the period of the next Enterprise Agreement, **this would allow management to make *most new jobs* EFRs.**

Aren't management saying they want balanced teaching-research roles to remain as the main type of academic work at the university?

Yes – but this is based on some tricky accounting. Balanced academics comprise just 45% of academic FTE staff (down from 70% in 2000), and can only be considered an “overwhelming majority” on management’s preferred basis: counting *only* EF and balanced (40:40:20) staff, and excluding casual staff, research-only staff and staff on other contracts. The Dean of FASS told discipline chairs last year that the faculty would now be pursuing an EFR-centred employment policy. Presumably FASS isn’t alone in this. At bargaining, management have also made it clear that they consider EFRs as teaching-research roles, given that they have a notional twenty percent research component. But the reality is that staff in EFRs will have virtually no time for anything other than teaching.

Why is the NTEU arguing to limit the proportion of EFRs?

We’ve already reluctantly accepted a virtual doubling of the number of EFRs by agreeing that 200 of the new jobs created to remedy long-term casualisation will be education-focused. We believe that the number of EFRs at the university should be strictly limited, and that a twenty percent proportion is reasonable. This is because:

- Accepting a large quantity of EFRs amounts to undermining the significance of 40:40:20 in the staff mix in the medium term. Established academics may feel personally safe from EFRs, but we should not be willing to trade away the careers of new colleagues.
- By unbundling research and teaching, increasing the number of EFRs lowers the apparent cost of delivering teaching – a big risk now that government funding is explicitly calibrated to costs.
- A high proportion of EFRs compromises the research-teaching nexus that should be fundamental to higher education (especially in a research university), and that distinguishes us from a TAFE. Especially at a research university, students expect academics to be active researchers in their disciplines.
- Unless the growth of EFs is carefully managed, the arrival of a huge number of new teaching-focused colleagues will create a further class division among academics, poisoning collegiality in disciplines across campus.

¹ The actual number of EFR academics is greater than the cap since some EFRs are part-time, and others have transferred into their education-focused position from 40:40:20 roles.

- Management have not considered even internal limitations on the use of EFRs, allowing them to concentrate teaching-heavy roles in one area, damaging the teaching and research nexus.
- EF staff, like all staff, should have choices of career. Some will want to stay in EF roles, others may want to increase their research. They should not be ‘trapped’ in their roles forever unless they choose to be! Staff should be able to freely transition between different academic pathways.

Why a 20% limit?

- We have already compromised enormously on EFRs, reluctantly allowing for more than double the current proportion. Management are seeking to triple the current number, and we are extremely concerned about the kind of large and uncontrolled growth this represents..
- Management say they want to keep 40:40:20 jobs as the predominant form of academic work. They have never made the case that they actually *need* a higher proportion of EFRs: they just want complete freedom to appoint as many staff as possible to teaching-heavy jobs. In these circumstances, 20% seems more than reasonable.

Why should current academics worry about the possibility of a lot more EFRs?

Increasing the number of EFRs is a threat to all academic staff:

- Nothing in the Enterprise Agreement would prevent management from determining that whole disciplines or sub-disciplines should be strategically ‘teaching-focused,’ and initiating a change management proposal to spill all existing 40:40:20 positions and fill them with EFRs.
- Management would have a freer hand to usher people on 40:40:20 into EFRs by performance management.

What’s the way forward?

There are several related fixes management should consider:

- Reduce the EF cap to 20%. Management have presented no evidence or research as to why they need to triple the number of EF positions, rather than rebuild the balanced workforce.
- Fix the serious workload problems, especially by reducing the teaching workload of EFRs so that it is more manageable, and increasing the research component. The NTEU has always argued that the teaching allocation of an EFR should be no higher than 60 percent – half as much again as ordinary teaching-research academics.
- It could be made much easier to move from an EFR to a 40:40:20 role. At the moment, management want staff to wait for four to five years.
- The existing flexibilities in the Enterprise Agreement could be better used, so that 40:40:20 staff who want to do more teaching are able to do so, and the need for more EFRs is consequently reduced.