

Stakeholder Summary

University culture shift: The advent of teaching-stream faculty

In Ontario as in many parts of the world, rising enrolments, reduced per-student funding and a growing focus on educational quality are putting pressure on higher education to find innovative solutions. One approach, being used in varying degrees in Ontario and around the world, is the advent of teaching-stream faculty, who focus solely on teaching and teaching-related activities.

But does this approach help research-active universities address the pressures of increased enrollment while improving the quality of teaching and learning? Or will it hasten the development of a two-tiered environment where teaching-stream faculty are considered less worthy and less valuable to the institution? Is the teaching-stream approach a welcome innovation or, as the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) has described it, “a dangerous precedent that devalues the traditional professorial role.”

A new report commissioned by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario** explores these and other questions about the use of teaching-stream faculty, an approach that represents a significant departure from the traditional faculty workload model of 40 per cent teaching, 40 per cent research and 20 per cent service.

Project description

Teaching-Stream Faculty in Ontario Universities consists of a review of relevant literature, an overview of the current range of these full-time faculty appointments at Ontario universities, comparisons with similar appointments at the national and international levels and a critical analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of expanding the use of teaching-stream faculty in Ontario universities. The report concludes with eight recommendations if the expansion of teaching-stream faculty is to be considered.

Findings/Policy implications

According to the report, a survey of Ontario universities found that 11 currently have teaching-stream faculty positions and that these faculty members are generally satisfied and committed to their positions. When asked whether they would move into a traditional, discipline-based research and teaching faculty appointment if the opportunity arose, 75 per cent of teaching-stream faculty who participated in the study said they would choose to remain in their position.

There is no clear evidence to substantiate or refute that teaching-stream faculty improve the student learning experience, says the report, although there is almost no correlation between teaching effectiveness and research effectiveness at the individual academic and department level. In fact, most studies actually suggest an inverse relationship between research productivity and teaching quality — at least when measured by student satisfaction surveys, says the report.

While evidence suggests that teaching is perceived by some research-active faculty as a burden that negatively impacts research, there is also evidence that faculty who engage in teaching and learning development activities are more likely to be effective teachers. “Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that there may be a positive relationship between the presence of teaching-stream faculty and the quality of the student learning experience,” say the authors.

Among perceived benefits of the teaching stream approach: a dedicated focus on teaching and the needs of the students; and the secure employment for faculty wanting to commit to teaching. Among perceived disadvantages: a cultural (two-tier) stigma within the institution because of the high value placed on research, the need for faculty to be engaged in scholarly work to ensure the quality of the student experience, and striking the appropriate workload balance among teaching, research and service.

The report says that issues around expanding the use of teaching-stream faculty are complex and varied and call into question much of what has traditionally characterized a university – described as a culture based on rank and status that is tightly aligned with the research mission. The authors acknowledge a high level of cultural resistance and cite limited integration of teaching-stream positions into academic culture due, in part, to the slow rate of change of collective agreements.

Among their recommendations for implementing or expanding the use of teaching-stream faculty: institutions need to be sensitive to the unique needs and environment of their faculties, departments and programs; they should start small and grow the role gradually; chairs and department heads should be educated about the role; and participation by all faculty in scholarship of teaching and learning should be supported and encouraged. The authors also identify areas for further research, including the impact of teaching-stream faculty on the quality of student learning and the experiences of faculty in sessional and part-time roles. They also call for broader representation from union and faculty associations in sharing their perspectives on the role of teaching-stream faculty.

Teaching-Stream Faculty in Ontario Universities was written by Susan Vajoczki, Nancy Fenton, Karen Menard of McMaster University and independent researcher Dawn Pollon.

