

Teaching-Track Economists – A Canadian Perspective

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We find that over two-thirds of economics departments in large Canadian universities have full-time teaching-track faculty positions that parallel traditional research-track positions, but with a heavier teaching focus. Teaching-track economists now approach one-sixth of the faculty complement – a substantial shift in resource allocations since 2000. This paper – a companion to Arico et al. (2024) – uses a mixed methods approach with interview and survey data to draw on the first-hand experience of teaching-track economists. We seek to understand these roles and how they compare with the United Kingdom and the United States to inform teaching- and research-track economists, department chairs, and graduate students about the teaching-track landscape and to support informed discussions in our discipline about possible trajectories of the teaching track in the increasingly complex teaching context of universities.²

There are no previous studies of teaching-track economists in Canada. A non-peer reviewed literature examines the history, contributions, and criticisms of teaching-track positions in Canadian universities (Vajocski et al. 2011; Sanders 2011).³ In a peer-reviewed study Rawn and Fox (2018) survey teaching-track faculty at large Canadian universities, across disciplines, about perceptions and allocations of work time. They find most teaching-track academics highly

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² Pandemic-driven student learning losses, the rise of generative artificial intelligence, and increasing reliance on international students in Canadian, US, UK, and Australian universities (Bound et al. 2021), increase complexity.

³ A 2013 quotation from the director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers is representative of the literature’s criticisms of the teaching-track: “When you’re also a researcher, you’re a different kind of teacher... It’s what distinguishes a university... Otherwise, it really is no different than a high school” (Bradshaw 2013).

value their positions and they call for future discipline-specific research studies. This paper fills that gap for economics, and our international scope adds comparative contexts.

I. Methods and Data

For Canada, we target teaching-track economists at 29 large public doctoral universities.⁴ Of these, 20 (69 percent) have teaching-track economists, who form an average of 15 percent of the full-time faculty. In 2023, our international research team interviewed 24 teaching-track economists in seven Canadian institutions and ran a survey with 32 replies from Canada (a response rate of 43.8 percent). Online Appendix A shows details and sample representativeness.

We use a mixed methods approach, combining both the thematic analysis of one-on-one interviews, which adds nuance and depth, and the empirical evidence from a survey. Arico et al. (2024) explains the approach and presents some results for Canada. This paper expands on those results. We use quotations exclusively from Canada to illustrate each theme we present, noting that the themes often traverse borders. The quantitative survey results allow comparisons, and online Appendix B provides complete tables and statistical tests.

II. A Canadian Teaching-Track Economist Model

We begin with a compilation of thematic results: teaching-track economists in Canada are passionate leaders in positions parallel to the research-track, including sabbaticals, protected academic freedom, and security after up-or-out tenure decisions – but with ambiguity about expectations, a high workload, and the challenge of establishing a distinct and valued role.

Table 1 shows that nearly 97 percent of responding teaching-track economists in Canada are in positions eligible for tenure or the equivalent, and roughly half are pre-tenure. Canada has

⁴ Nearly all Canadian universities are public and large. Some are huge. For example, the University of Toronto has an enrolment of 99,500 in 2023, which is far more than any university in the United States. We exclude 18 French-speaking universities. Our 29 target universities have mean enrolments of 33,140 students in 2023 and together have over 80 percent of all students among the 77 English-speaking universities.

the highest pre-tenure proportion of the three countries and stands in stark contrast to the United States where the teaching-track mostly is *not* parallel to the research-track. The parallel between teaching- and research-track positions is a major theme in the interviews. One interviewee explains: “*There is a tenure clock and after six years, you’ve got to go up, regardless of your stream. It’s up or out.*” Another remarks: “*The [tenure] process...is very similar... There’s a deadline [for] submitting your documents, [finding] externals...[and then a] committee, just like the research faculty... So, the process would be exactly the same.*”

Table 1. Distinctions of Teaching-Track Economists in Canada, Survey Data

	Percentage		
	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
<i>Panel A. Tenure or its equivalent</i>			
Already obtained	51.6	75.0	8.9
Not yet obtained, but eligible	45.2	10.7	3.1
Not eligible	3.2	14.3	88.0
<i>Panel B. Other categorical survey questions about the role and role holders</i>			
“I have always preferred a teaching focused role which aligns with my passions and ambitions” is a factor in career decision [yes]	67.7 (8.4)	36.9 (5.3)	56.5 (3.6)
“I am eligible to go on sabbatical” [yes]	83.9 (6.6)	38.6 (5.3)	27.7 (3.2)
“I have faculty member voting rights in departmental meetings” [yes]	96.8 (3.2)	56.6 (5.4)	56.5 (3.6)
“Is there a faculty/staff labor union at your institution?” [yes, and can join]	90.3 (5.4)	96.4 (2.0)	33.2 (3.4)
“The hiring process for teaching-focused faculty is parallel to the hiring process for research-focused faculty” [agree, strongly agree]	58.1 (8.9)	31.0 (5.0)	27.0 (3.2)
“I am valued by my department colleagues” [agree, strongly agree]	93.5 (4.4)	81.0 (4.3)	78.9 (3.0)
“Overall, I am satisfied with my job” [agree, strongly agree]	90.3 (5.3)	77.4 (4.6)	79.6 (2.9)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

We identify a theme of passionate educators. One interviewee says, “*Teaching was always my calling.*” Correspondingly, the first row of Panel B in Table 1 shows that teaching-track economists in Canada are more likely to report choosing this career to match their passions and interests, relative to the UK and US samples. The theme of passionate educators extends to

hiring criteria. A senior interviewee explains: *“We want people who have demonstrated that they love teaching, [not] someone who looks at this as kind of a backup if what they’re really applying for are research-stream positions... We definitely [seek applicants with a] strong interest in making teaching the focus of their career.”* Another interviewee describes a deliberate and informed choice between a research- and teaching-track career: *“The promotion terms are different, the teaching loads are different, and the salary is different... The first two don’t bother me...because it’s a different position... That was what I was looking for, and that’s what I got.”*⁵

Table 1 also shows, in contrast to the other countries, most teaching-track economists in Canada have sabbaticals and enjoy full departmental voting rights. Faculty in Canada are also largely unionized, and much more so than in the United States. The Canadian hiring process for teaching-track economists is more likely to be perceived to parallel research-track hiring, although this perception is not uniform, with 58.1 percent agreeing. The last two rows of Table 1 show that teaching-track economists in Canada, relative to the UK or US samples, are more likely to report feeling valued by their colleagues and to be satisfied with their jobs.

Another clear theme is the pivotal role of pioneers in delineating the teaching-track economist role, shaping expectations, and improving status.⁶ Regarding similarities or discrepancies in perceptions of the teaching track relative to the research track, an interviewee voices the work towards parallel status: *“We’ve had pioneers that kind of were trailblazers. At some point...there may have been some discrepancies, but...given the contributions [of teaching-*

⁵ Footnote 8 in Section III shares the remaining sentiments about salary differences.

⁶ The University of Toronto (U of T), which employs the largest number of teaching-track economists in Canada, is a leading example. In 1975, U of T introduced positions of “Tutor,” with one-year renewable contracts, and “Senior Tutor,” which granted five-year renewable contracts for those promoted after five years. In 1999, U of T replaced those with “Lecturer” and “Senior Lecturer” positions where promotion granted the equivalent of tenure. In 2015, U of T replaced those with “Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream,” “Associate Professor, Teaching Stream,” and “Professor, Teaching Stream” positions. Among the 81 teaching-track economists identified at Canadian universities, 67% have “Professor” in their title.

track academics]...I don't think anyone is of that mindset anymore." A subtheme is the importance of hiring teaching-track economists who elevate the status of the position. One interviewee says: *"Prior to me...some people that had worked as a sessional kind of got grandfathered [in]... There wasn't really much focus on this... It's changed a lot at the university level and the departmental level as it's become much more established."* Another describes how an early pioneer said *"hell no!"* to a grandfathering-in approach in favor of *"when we recruit, we're going to do this legit."*

III. Challenges

The Canadian model of professionalizing the teaching-track⁷ is a work-in-progress. A theme is that teaching-track economists perceive ambiguity from promotion criteria spanning a multitude of categories – various distinct elements of teaching, research/scholarship, and educational leadership, among others – each vaguely defined. An interviewee explains: *"There's extensive documentation, but it's all left kind of 50 percent super specific, 50 percent super vague ... Some things can hit all of the categories... But, without clear definitions of each category, it's a struggle."* Another says *"It's in our collective agreement...we're supposed to do scholarship activities. But it is not very clear...whether it refers to publication or...to something else."* A subtheme is that ambiguity may be empowering. An interviewee says *"They sell it as kind of a good point, but there's a lot of grey, and it's true...it doesn't box you in... No one's going to tell you what [is the] requirement of educational leadership or creativity. And, so, I guess it's good and bad."* Yet, a clear theme is that teaching-track economists in Canada perceive their primary job as teaching with both *quality* and *quantity* mandates, and quantity may mean many students. An interviewee says *"The focus of my position is teaching. So, teaching more courses obviously,*

⁷ Canadian economics departments also use sessional instructors and contractually limited appointments outside the teaching track. Professionalization of the *teaching track* does not generalize to professionalization of *teaching*.

but also coming up with new teaching initiatives...[to] improve the undergraduate student experience.” Another says: “We are given larger classes, and our expectation is to develop excellence in teaching versus the more traditional research track faculty.”⁸

Figure 1 shows that teaching-track economists in Canada teach substantially more students – an average of nearly 1,000 per academic year – than those in the US or UK samples. The Canadian 25th percentile (560 students per year) is higher than the median in either other country. Table 2 shows that teaching-track economists in Canada also teach significantly more distinct courses per year than the UK sample and prepare significantly more new courses than the US sample.⁹ Also, teaching-track economists in Canada work longer hours and are more likely to feel overwhelmed by students’ mental health needs. The last row of Table 2 shows that most teaching-track economists in Canada agree that student

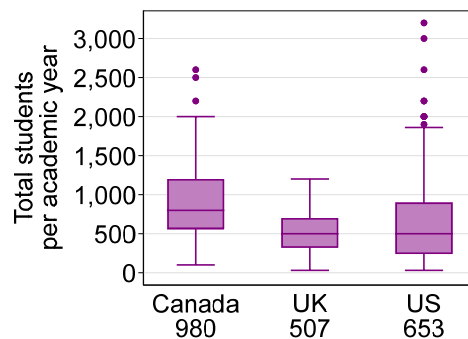


Figure 1. Teaching-track economists in Canada teach many students

Note: The survey asks: “What is the approximate total number of students you teach in a typical academic year?” Boxes show 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles (with whiskers and outside values also shown), and below the country name is the mean value.

evaluations are heavily weighted in performance assessments. The well-documented limitations of anonymous student evaluations (Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans 2013) may cause discrepancies between real impact and what can be easily measured and observed.

⁸ From Footnote 5, the interviewee continues “[But] the salary differential...I think it’s around 30 percent... that’s upsetting... It’s a lot of work to teach the way I teach with the focus that I teach and the amount that I teach.” The later part illustrates the quality and quantity theme. Quantifying salary differentials is a topic for future research.

⁹ Many courses and many new preparations can cause conflict with the theme of teaching *quality* and *quantity* being key aspects of a teaching-track career. When quantity manifests as many courses and new preparations the role may veer towards that of sessional instructors. For this divergent theme, an interviewee illustrates with “We are used as the resources to fill the gaps...for example, when they’re on the sabbatical... So, one of my [current] seven [courses] is now going to be environmental... I have [taught] 18 distinct courses, 18! ...This is how we differ...the regular faculty members...have maybe 2 or 3 or maximum 4.” Another interviewee uses the phrase “teaching machine” to capture this idea.

Table 2. Potential Challenges for Teaching-Track Economists in Canada, Survey Data

	Mean or Percentage		
	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
“Counting each semester/term/ session/quarter in a regular academic year, how many distinct courses/modules do you lead or are involved in teaching in a typical academic year?” [number]	4.9 (0.3)	3.8 (0.2)	4.6 (0.2)
“Within the last five academic years, how many courses/modules you taught were new preparations?” [number]	3.6 (0.4)	3.6 (0.2)	2.8 (0.1)
“Approximately how many hours do you work per week in a typical week?” [number]	51.9 (2.2)	47.2 (1.2)	45.6 (0.8)
“I feel overwhelmed by student mental health needs” [percent often, always]	54.8 (8.9)	20.2 (4.4)	31.3 (3.3)
“Student teaching evaluations are heavily weighted in assessing my performance” [percent agree, strongly agree]	58.1 (8.9)	47.6 (5.4)	73.8 (3.2)

Notes: Means for numerical variables and percentages for categorical variables. Standard errors in parentheses.

A subtle, but intriguing, theme for Canada is the challenge of developing a distinct identity and role for teaching-track economists that is valued by departments, universities, and beyond. For example, an interviewee says: “*It wasn’t all...smooth sailing to get where we are... There was...skepticism...a concern that...if you’re not actively doing research, can you be an effective teacher?*” which may reflect earlier, nationally publicized, criticisms of the teaching-track (Bradshaw 2013). Another interviewee explains an evolving role: “*[Initially] people weren’t clear on...what the teaching stream was or what we could add... But, now that we’ve had a few years...to put forth some initiatives...[that received] a lot of positive feedback from students...[there is] a greater understanding of how the teaching stream can complement the professorial stream...and [to] see the potential of having a teaching stream... It’s also...elevated the teaching culture...both within our unit and [beyond]... We’re talking about teaching a lot more... We have focused our teaching stream on the first year [economics principles and intro math] and now there’s other areas as well.*” A related theme to identity formation is that strengthening economic networks and teaching-track communities can support progress for those in these roles. For instance, one interview says “*I would love to*

make [connections] across Canada... The Canadian Economics Association can probably do a better job... I should probably just step up.”

IV. Concluding Remarks

The evidence from teaching track-economists in Canada points to a model that allows departments to attract passionate educators and create a desirable and significant career path for teaching-track economists. Early pioneers have shaped the role, and it will likely continue evolving as nearly half of teaching-track economists in Canada are pre-tenure. We hope that our findings, based on perceptions of the current Canadian landscape, raise questions and offer ideas for economics departments around the world. Our project is ongoing.

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