

The Unwritten Path: Mid-Career Transitions and Challenges for Economics Educators in UK Academia

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Abstract

Education-focused academic roles in UK economics departments grew to represent 19% of the academic staff in 2022 (from 8% in 2012). Yet mid-career economists in these positions often navigate careers lacking clear progression pathways, institutional recognition, and adequate support, what we term the "unwritten path." Drawing on staff data, literature on academic career development and disciplinary culture, and insights from a Mid-Career Workshop for Economics Educators, this paper examines career progression and experiences for education-focused economists. We develop a conceptual framework that explains why the unwritten path emerges situating mid-career trajectories at the intersection of three dimensions: individual trajectory, institutional structures, and disciplinary/departmental culture. Our analysis reveals how the unclear frameworks, combined with economics' hierarchical culture and narrow definitions of success, create particular challenges for this growing community. We identify strategies for individual navigation while arguing that sustainable change requires systemic reform.

Keywords: Economics Education, Mid-careers, Academic Progression, Economics Culture

JEL: A2, A13, A14, J2, I23

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1. Introduction

Despite the growth of the education-focused career pathway at UK universities, individuals in these roles, upon reaching mid-career, often find limited opportunities for structured support or peer exchange. In this respect, despite the recognised importance of the academic mid-career as a period of reflection and recalibration, economists in education-focused roles often feel they navigate this part of the path without a map.

Drawing on insights from a workshop for mid-career economics academics focused on education, hosted in April 2025 at Aston University in the UK, this paper explores and begins the process of mapping the "unwritten path" that education-focused economists face.

As things stand, little is known about the professional experiences, developmental challenges, and evolving identities of academics in education-focused positions. Research specifically examining education pathways remains limited, notably that which examines the mid-career stage. Moreover, while the culture of economics has been scrutinised for its hierarchies and exclusionary dynamics, how this culture shapes the career trajectories of education-focused economists has received scant attention.

This paper addresses these gaps by examining how mid-career economists in education-focused roles experience career progression and recognition, and how institutional structures and disciplinary culture shape their opportunities. Drawing on staff data from 2012/13 to 2021/22, relevant literature, and insights from the Mid-Career Workshop, we develop a conceptual framework that situates individual experiences within broader structural and cultural contexts.

Our central contribution is manifold. First, we draw upon workshop applicants' own words (extracted from attendance expressions of interest) to document how mid-career economists focused on education view their career progress, their motivations, and the challenges they face. Second, we develop a conceptual framework that integrates individual trajectories, institutional structures, and disciplinary culture to explain why education-focused pathways in economics remain "unwritten" and how these are shaped more by institutional omission than intentional design.

By situating individual challenges within these systemic patterns, we aim to support colleagues navigating this career pathway and demonstrate that the difficulties facing mid-career education-focused economists are not personal failings but reflections of structural and cultural misalignments. Moreover, our intention is not merely to document barriers but to stimulate constructive dialogue and positive, actionable, insights for both individuals and the broader institutional and disciplinary culture. On one hand, we issue a call for action on how institutions and the economics profession can better support and value diverse forms of academic contribution. On the other hand, we also acknowledge that, in absence of instantaneous cultural change, individuals must still navigate flawed and unhelpful constraints—by advocating for community, network-building, and focus on deliberate, considered, agency-boosting actions.

Through this two-pronged approach, we seek to reduce the professional isolation often experienced at mid-career and advocate for recognitions of a more inclusive definition of academic excellence.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines key themes emerging from workshop participants' expressions of interest, highlighting common challenges and aspirations. Section 3 provides empirical and theoretical context, documenting the growth of education-focused roles in economics and reviewing literature on academic career development, education pathways, and disciplinary culture. Section 4 presents our conceptual framework for understanding mid-career trajectories in education-focused roles, situating the "*unwritten path*" at the intersection of individual characteristics, institutional structures, and disciplinary culture. This framework then informs Section 5's recommendations for how mid-career education-focused economists can work on making their own path more navigable.

2. Voices from the Mid-Career Workshop for Academic Economists

In the UK, a growing number of economists in academia are pursuing education-focused roles and, given the growth of this career pathway over the last decade, many are now reaching the mid-career stage. While early career training and development programmes have become well established, equivalent provision for mid-career academics remain limited.

The motivation for a Mid-Career Workshop for academic economists with a focus on education arose from the persistent shortfall in dedicated professional development opportunities for this stage. The workshop took place in April 2025 and was designed to provide practical advice while creating a space for reflection, networking, and the articulation of challenges often overlooked in institutional and disciplinary discussions.

The event was jointly organised by the Birmingham Economics Education Seminars (BEES) and the Economics Network, with the support of I-Lead: Centre for Innovation, Leadership, Education and Development (King's College London) and the Royal Economic Society (RES). It was hosted in person at Aston University in Birmingham (UK).

Most of the participants had previously engaged with events for early-careers, whether within their institutions or through external networks. Career progression has, for many, presented a scarcity of structured opportunities for continued support and career development; creating the impression that the mid-career stage marked the end of the need for guidance—a position which was thoroughly refuted over the course of the workshop.

Participation was open to all academics who self-identified as being at a mid-career stage, with no formal eligibility criteria imposed. This openness was intentional: as explained section 3, “mid-career” is less a fixed stage defined by years of service or job title, and more a subjective experience shaped by the developing of the roles and responsibilities individuals encounter at this point in the professional journey.

This section documents participants’ voices, using a thematic analysis of the responses provided at the application process and contributions made during workshop activities. It was these voices that inspired the writing of this paper.

2.1 Motivations and Challenges for Participation

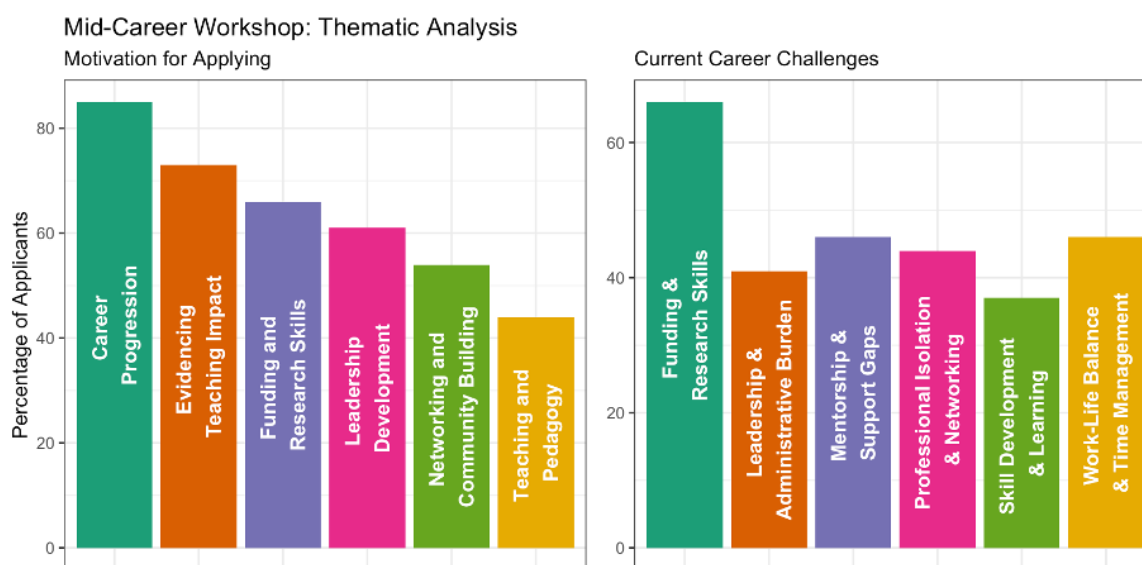
In total, the workshop received 50 applications, of which 9 were deemed ineligible. The ineligible applicants typically fell into two groups: those not employed in academia, and those who could only attend remotely whereas the workshop was designed as an in-person gathering. This left 41 UK-based academics who were invited to participate, with 30 ultimately joining the workshop.

Most participants were academics in education pathways, although, a small number came from Teaching & Research (T&R) roles, either considering a transition across pathways or already holding substantial education-related responsibilities within their current posts.

As part of the application process, applicants were asked to reflect on their motivations and challenges. Specifically, they were invited to answer two questions: (1) *“What motivates you to participate in this workshop?”* and a two-part question, (2) *“What specific challenges or goals do you currently face in your mid-career academic journey? How do you see this workshop helping you address these challenges or achieve your goals?”*

Figure 1 presents the results of a thematic analysis of applicants’ responses to these two questions. For each question, motivations to attend the workshop and current mid-career challenges, six key themes were identified.

Figure 1: Motivation and Challenges for Workshop Applicants



2.1.1 What motivates you to participate in this workshop?

“I’m an education-focused lecturer [...] I know little about the field (how to get published, secure grant funding, etc). I also struggle to meet the criteria for promotion (seems to want things that are outside my role), secure senior

administrative roles, and (due to teaching schedule) network and attend conferences.”

The above response summarises effectively many of the shared concerns of those who registered to the workshop. **Career progression** emerged as the dominant driver for applying to the workshop (cited by 35 out of 41 applicants). Within this broad category, however, there was notable variation. Around two-thirds sought proactive guidance for forthcoming promotion applications or applications to Advanced Higher Education Fellowships¹, while about a third described themselves as being “stuck,” at a “crossroads,” or at a “turning point,” seeking inspiration and direction.

“I would like to understand better how to articulate and evidence impact as well as understand more about research funding for scholarship research”

Three further categories: **evidencing teaching impact, funding and research, and leadership development**, were also frequently mentioned. While distinct, each can be interpreted as ultimately serving the primary goal of career advancement, as these aspects are usually used as promotion criteria, a point that becomes clearer in the discussion of challenges.

A fifth theme, **networking and community building**, was present in 25 of the 41 statements. Applicants often linked community and mentorship directly to navigating ambiguous career paths, particularly *where “the pathway is not as clear cut as in traditional research positions.”*

Finally, the sixth category, **teaching and teaching innovation**, reflected both intrinsic interest (e.g. enthusiasm for AI in education) and pragmatic concerns such as improving engagement in large classes. It is worth noting, however, that at this career stage teaching itself was not typically perceived as a source of difficulty. Unlike early-career academics, who often worry about classroom management or developing confidence as lecturers, most participants were already experienced educators with a strong record of delivering high-quality teaching. Their concerns

¹ These fellowships are administered by the UK-based organization Advanced HE. They are a form of professional accreditation that recognises the practice, impact, and leadership of individuals in teaching and supporting learning within higher education. These fellowships benchmark professional practice against the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). Applicants must demonstrate their commitment to professionalism and higher education, receiving one of four categories of fellowship: Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow, or Principal Fellow. Mid-career academics are likely to be preparing for Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow.

instead centred on the wider set of responsibilities, scholarship, leadership, and impact, that increasingly define mid-career trajectories.

2.1.2 What specific challenges or goals do you currently face in your mid-career academic journey?

“Doing research (in economics, in pedagogy) due to workload (research seems more like a hobby, something I do only in the summer).”

When asked about challenges, the most prominent category was **funding and research**, reflecting widespread unease about expectations for “scholarly activity.” While education pathways often include scholarship as a criterion for promotion, it is not always clear what this entails. The original intent, to value a wide spectrum of contributions to teaching and learning, has in practice narrowed to focus heavily on conventional research outputs. This is compounded by teaching-heavy workloads and limited time to publish, leaving many staff feeling unaccomplished. Even when broader forms of scholarship are recognised, promotion panels (often dominated by research-focused academics) may still default to traditional metrics such as journal publications, rankings, and research grants.

A second major theme concerned **leadership and administrative burden**.

Participants frequently noted the challenge of identifying roles that simultaneously met personal interests and departmental needs, as one participant noticed among the main challenges:

“align with personal interests while [contributing toward] career progression”.

Some also expressed frustration that such responsibilities, though often disproportionately carried by education-focused staff, are not consistently recognised within promotion frameworks.

Other concerns related to **mentorship and support gaps**, with some noting the absence of senior role models who had successfully advanced on education-focused pathways, which may translate into lack of guidance. Relatedly, **professional isolation and limited networking opportunities** contribute to a sense of being “left behind” compared to peers on research-intensive tracks.

Others emphasised the need for **ongoing skill development and learning**, particularly in areas such as leadership, funding, and pedagogical innovation. It is important to recognise that most of these educators were trained primarily as

economists, and specialisation in education demands a different set of skills that many may not initially be equipped with. Engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning, or publishing in pedagogical research journals, requires familiarity with research norms and conventions that are often far removed from their disciplinary training. When situated in departments where field research is regarded as the only legitimate or prestigious form of research, education-focused staff may find themselves professionally isolated. In such contexts, the lack of recognition and support not only reinforces this isolation but also limits their ability to acquire and develop the skills needed to progress within education pathways.

“Balancing research, teaching, supervision, and students’ demands can be overwhelming, and I would like to hear how others navigate these demands while staying excited about their work.”

Finally, issues of **work–life balance** and time management were repeatedly cited, reflecting the challenge of combining heavy teaching responsibilities, administrative duties, and expectations of scholarly activity without adequate support structures.

2.2 Workshop Overview: Structure and Reflections

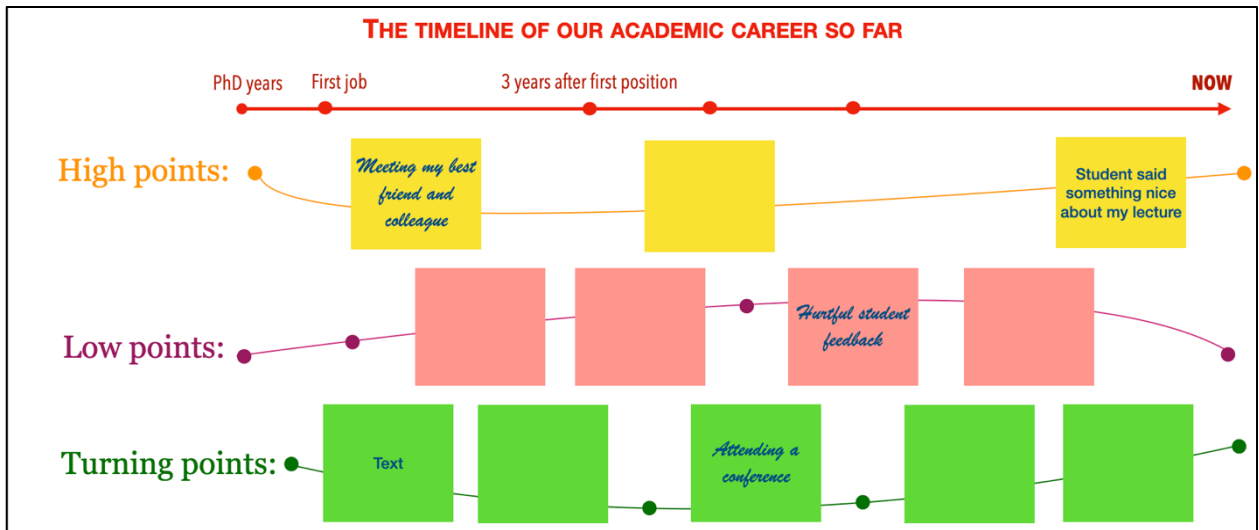
There were six key sessions for the two-day workshop. Table 1 shows these sessions and their descriptions. These sessions were facilitated by academics from economics and other disciplines, each bringing relevant expertise and experience. Most sessions included participatory, hands-on elements. There were also multiple opportunities (both formal and informal) for participants to interact with one another and with facilitators.

Ice-breaking exercises fostered networking and reflection. One such activity asked participants to identify key points in their career so far, categorised as “high points,” “low points,” and “turning points.” Figure 2 shows a stylised version of this exercise. Using post-it notes, participants populated a whiteboard with their experiences.

Table 1: Sessions at the Mid-Career Workshop for Economists

Session	Description
Evidencing Impact in Teaching and Education in Economics	<p>Evidencing impact is one of the core pillars of both academic promotion pathways and achieving higher levels of professional recognition (such as Principal and National Teaching Fellow). It is also an area where educational specialists often struggle with difficulties such as measurement, collection of evidence, or overly narrow definitions of 'impact'.</p> <p>This session provided insights on how we can maximise the impact of our work and how best we can evidence this impact across the spectrum of education-aligned activities. It provided an opportunity for reflection and feedback on our own achievements and activities and how these can be evidenced.</p>
Funding for Education: Stories from the Front Line	<p>Successfully applying for grants serves many purposes in the academic and educational community. Functionally, grants enable educational research projects—whether this is in terms of achieving scale or providing capital to support a project. Grants also serve other purposes as a form of recognition when applying for fellowships or promotion, or in developing professional reputation amongst peers.</p> <p>In this session we gathered and critically reflected on insights from educational researchers who have successfully applied for grants.</p>
The Economics Education Pathway and the Importance of Community	<p>This conversation highlighted the role that external communities such as the Economics Network and the Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics (CTaLE) play in bringing together economics educators and explained how to engage with these communities.</p>
Mentoring in Education-Focused Roles	<p>Career mentoring has been shown to provide a range of benefits to both mentees and mentors, including guidance and support, career development, networking, and goal setting.</p> <p>This session will featured an introduction to the extended benefits of mentoring and the sharing of experiences of ways mentoring benefits both mentor and mentee.</p>
Applying for the Advanced HE Fellowships	<p>This session provided an overview of the different Advanced Higher Education Fellowships and their requirements, and a comparison with the National Teaching Fellow scheme. Participants were guided through key considerations for preparing strong applications, with a focus on demonstrating engagement with professional practice in line with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). It offered practical advice to ensure submissions are complete, reflective, and aligned with the expectations of the Fellowship schemes.</p>
Making the most of Leadership Roles in Economics	<p>This session considered the role of leadership and administration in supporting the development of education-focussed career trajectories. It is well known that 'education pathway' staff often shoulder a disproportionate proportion of administrative duties—so we considered the ways in which academics can leverage and maximise the benefit of this administrative experience. We will also considered the roles of networks and external organisations (such as RES) in providing opportunities for academic leadership experience.</p>

Figure 2: Describing Experiences in the Academic Career



The most frequently mentioned “**high point**” was securing a permanent position. Other notable highlights included finding like-minded colleagues, taking on leadership roles, designing new modules, and receiving awards. Common “**low points**” included the challenges of teaching during COVID-19, delayed promotions, feeling stuck in a role, burnout, and rejections. For “**turning points**,” participants cited milestones such as assuming a first leadership role, securing funding, joining professional networks, presenting at conferences, or changing jobs. These reflections bring to life the structural and cultural challenges faced by mid-career economics educators. High points underscore how recognition and visible contributions can bolster career satisfaction. By contrast, low points illustrate the strains that undermine engagement and wellbeing. Turning points highlight the strategies individuals adopt to navigate a system that often lacks formal guidance or clear validation for education-focused work. Together these experiences reveal the lived realities of academics navigating an “*unwritten path*”, a career trajectory characterised by ambiguous expectations, uneven recognition, and progression routes only partially formalised.

3. Contextualising the “Unwritten Path” for Economics Educators

Structural changes in UK higher education, including an increasing financial reliance on tuition fees and external research income, alongside the introduction of performance-based frameworks such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), have intensified demands on research-focused staff while simultaneously driven the expansion of education-focused roles, contributing to increasingly segmented and stratified academic career structures (Bennett et al., 2018a; Chalmers, 2011).

This section contextualises the workshop participants' experiences. First, using data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), we show the main patterns of these positions have evolved in Economics since 2012/13 and compare these to the broader transformations occurring across the higher education sector and the developing literature on academic career development. We then review the existing literature on academic career development which allow us to show how these experiences are not isolated. We also look at the impact of specific disciplinary culture.

3.1 The Evolution of Education-Focused Positions in Economics

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) illustrates the scale of the transformation in the UK higher education sector. Figure 3 shows two clear trends within both economics and the wider higher education sector: a steady increase in the total number of full-time academic staff, and a growing proportion of those who are employed on 'teaching-only' contracts.²

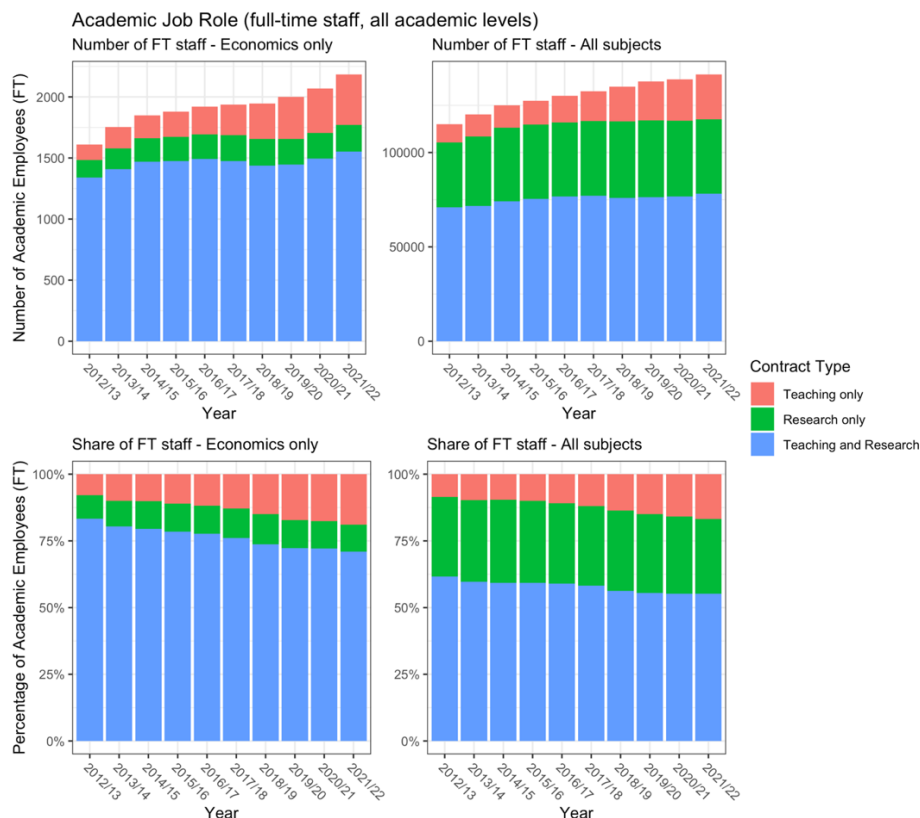
In economics (Figure 3, left panel), the number of full-time teaching-only staff more than tripled between 2012/13 and 2021/22, rising from 127 (7.9% of full-time staff) to 413 (18.9%). Over the same period, the number of staff on teaching and research (T&R) contracts grew only modestly (from 1,341 to 1,551) resulting in a proportionally decline as percentage of total full-time employment, from 83.3% to 71%.

Across the broader UK higher education sector, similar but less pronounced trends are observed (Figure 3, right panel). Teaching-only staff started from a slightly higher base of 8.5% in 2012/13 and grew considerably, though at a slower pace than in

² The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) classifies academic staff as Research and Teaching, Teaching-only and Research-only. This terminology has been contested within many institutions, as staff on teaching-only contracts frequently undertake research duties and remain research active. In this paper, we therefore predominantly use the term "education-focused" to better reflect the breadth of these roles. However, when referring specifically to HESA data, we retain the designation "teaching-only" for consistency with the official classification.

economics. The sector-wide decline in the share of T&R contracts was also less marked, around 6.5 percentage points compared to 12.3 in economics, partly because the expansion of teaching-only roles was offset by a small reduction in research-only positions. Taken together, this suggests that while the growth of teaching-only roles is a sector-wide phenomenon, the shift has been considerably sharper in economics. This may reflect the higher increase in student numbers in economics, from 2014/15 to 2021/22 the increase in economics was 34% compared to 23.4% for the overall student population.

Figure 3: Academic Positions 2012/13 - 2021/22

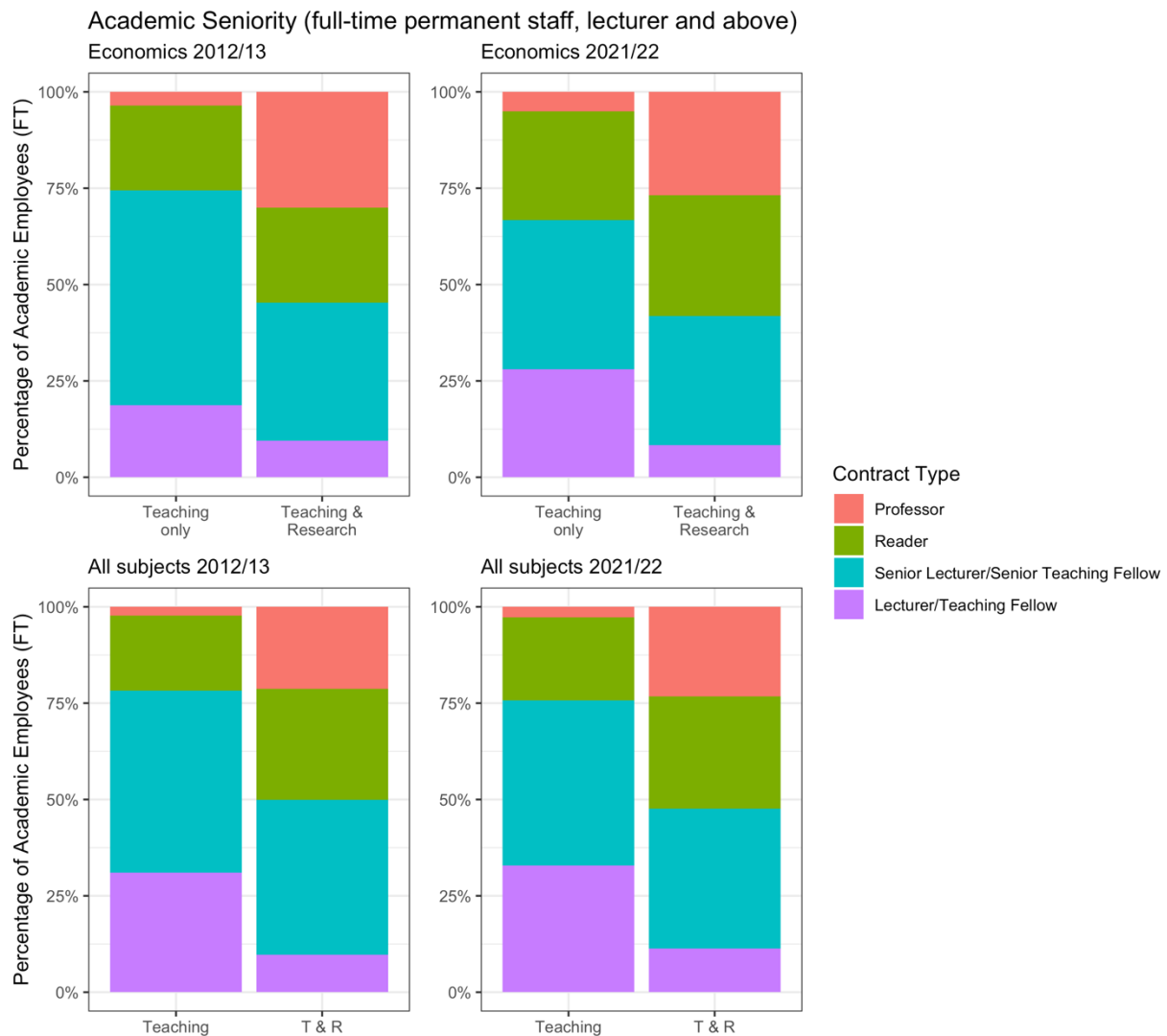


Source: Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

These changes have created a sizeable community of academics who are now advancing (or seeking to advance) through their careers. This expansion has prompted the development of more structured career-progression pathways designed for education-focused staff. In principle, these frameworks offer a better fit than evaluating educational contributions through conventional T&R promotion

routes. However, we notice very little changes in the seniority composition as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Career Stage Among Economists (Teaching-only vs T&R)



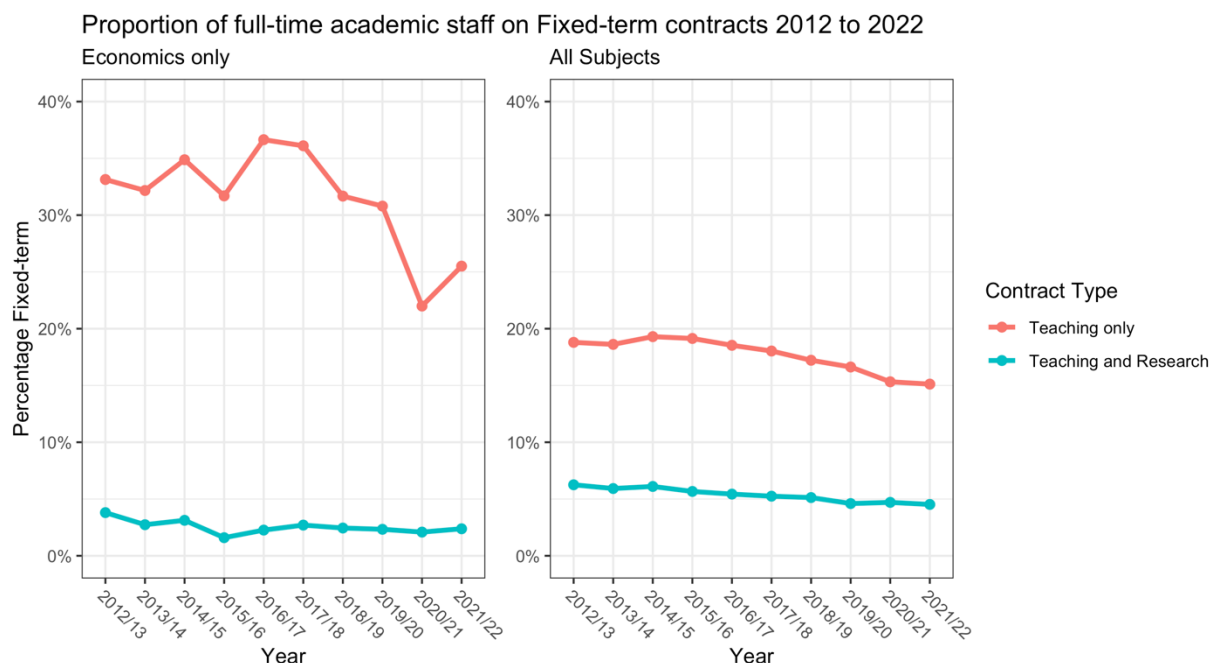
Source: Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Figure 4 illustrates the seniority composition of full-time permanent academic roles in 2012/13 (left-panel) and in 2021/22 (right-panel), for teaching-only and T&R staff. A clear pattern emerges: the introduction of formal education pathways seems to have little impact on the seniority structure for teaching-only academics in economics (top panels). Among teaching-only staff, junior positions were around 18.7% in 2012/13, and by 2021/22 there was little evidence of upward movement, this is in line with the sector (bottom panels). Indeed, the share of junior roles increased slightly, while

professorial positions remained largely stagnant with a small increase in Reader positions. Workshop participants also noted that current promotion criteria often fail to capture the full breadth of duties and contributions undertaken by education-focused academics (Arico et al., 2024).

Interpreting these results requires however some caution due to inconsistencies in job titles. Across UK universities, education-focused staff are assigned a wide range of titles, from clear and functional (e.g., Teaching Fellow, Lecturer) to opaque and institution-specific (e.g., University Teaching Associate, University Teacher in Economics, Senior Associate Teaching Fellow), which reinforce distinctions from T&R staff (Bamber et al., 2017). These inconsistencies complicate comparisons of seniority both across institutions where the same title represents different levels of seniority (e.g., Senior Teaching Fellow may have different seniority in different institutions) and within institutions where similar titles do not always align (e.g. Senior Teaching Fellow being a level below Senior Lecturer).

Figure 5: Fixed-Term Contracts



Source: Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

There are two additional aspects that distinguish teaching-focus contracts: the prevalence of fixed-term contracts and the demographic composition. Figure 5 shows the percentage of fixed term contracts for economics (left panel) and the wider sector (right panel). In economics, on average, 31.5% of teaching-only staff were employed on fixed-term contracts during the period considered, compared to just 2.6% of T&R staff. Although both figures have declined slightly in recent years, the gap remains substantial.

In comparison, on average, only 17.7% of teaching-only staff in the broader academic sector hold fixed-term contracts and the difference between teaching-only and T&R staff is much narrower (Figure 5, right panel). While economics T&R staff enjoy greater job security than the sectoral average, economists on teaching-only contracts are more likely to be on precarious contracts well into mid-career.

Reflecting on their careers, workshop participants often cited obtaining a permanent contract as a major career milestone, emphasising uncertainties involved in reaching this point.

Such job insecurity can have far-reaching effects. Academics on fixed-term contracts often experience slower career progression and more limited access to training or development opportunities (Ackers & Oliver, 2007; Bryson & Barnes, 2000; Menard & Shinton, 2022). This can reduce job satisfaction and erode personal wellbeing and family life (Arday, 2022; Bertolini et al., 2024).

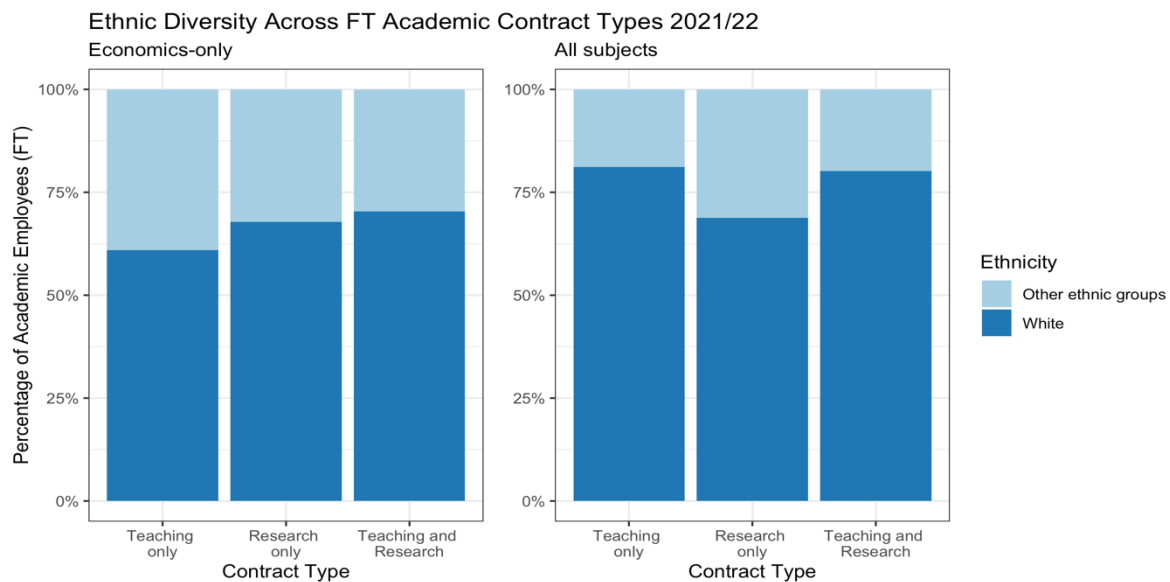
In economics, there is a higher ethnic diversity than in the overall academia, and this is even higher among education staff (Advani et al., 2020; Bateman et al., 2021).

Figure 6 shows the ethnic composition of academic staff. For economics (left panel), we observe that, in the academic year 2021/22, 39% of teaching-only staff in economics are from minoritised ethnic groups compared to 30% of T&R staff.³ Much of this difference is explained by the higher share of academics from Black ethnic groups among teaching-only (6.3% vs 3.4% for T&R staff).

Figure 7 shows the gender composition of academic staff. Women are underrepresented in economics (left panel) compared to the overall sector (right panel). They represent 38.2% of staff in teaching-only contracts and 27.4% in T&R ones in economics.

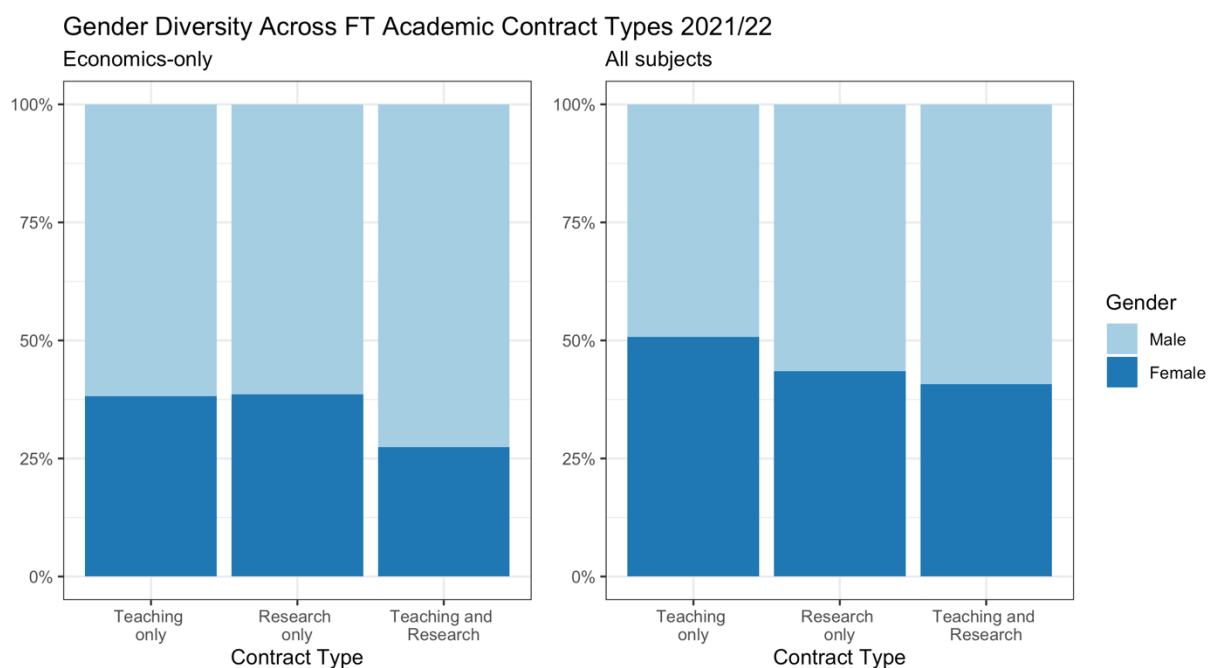
³ These percentages are for staff with known ethnicity data. Around 8.6% of full-time academics in economics are labelled as “unknown/non available” in the field of ethnicity.

Figure 6: Ethnic Composition of Job Roles: Economics v All Subjects



Source: Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Figure 7: Gender Composition of Job Roles: Economics v All Subjects



Source: Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Overall, ethnic diversity and the share of women are higher among economics staff in teaching-only contracts. While this greater representation may be considered a strength in the economics education pathway, it also exposes a vulnerability: if teaching-only staff face greater barriers to career progression, less job security, and diminished recognition within departments, these groups may disproportionately bear the costs of structural inequities in career pathways.

3.2 What Happens at Mid-Career? Individual and Contextual Factors Shaping Academic Development

The structural patterns outlined above shape the environment in which mid-career economics educators develop professionally. Of course, some of these patterns may not only impact economists as highlighted by the broader literature on academic career development.

Academic career development refers to the evolving processes through which scholars navigate roles in research, teaching and leadership across their careers (Zacher et al., 2019). Early models of career development depict the mid-career stage as a relatively stable period of consolidation, but more recent literature challenges this linear view, portraying it instead as a dynamic period of reassessment, identity negotiation, and adaptation to shifting institutional and societal expectations (Baldwin et al., 2005; Clark et al., 1996; Treebak & Thomsen, 2022).

However, much of the research has focused on early careers, leaving mid-career comparatively unexplored. One of the challenges in studying this mid-career stage is that, to start, there is no consistent definition, even though mid-career is the longest phase in an individual's professional life, spanning 15 to 25 years. Definitions of mid-career in academia have considered age (midlife can be between 35 and 65), time in the profession (e.g. specific years post-PhD), academic rank (e.g. Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor), or leadership responsibilities (e.g. Head of Teaching, Programme Director). However, these proxies often fail to capture the diversity of academic pathways and the non-linear trajectories many academics experience.

Rather than applying rigid definitions, it is more productive to consider the individual and contextual factors that shape how academics navigate this stage. Zacher et al. (2019) highlight that challenges are tied not only to role or rank but also to personal identities, and contextual factors.

Among individual factors, gender remains a key source of systemic inequality, often becoming more pronounced at mid-career. Studies highlight disparities in pay, promotion, and leadership opportunities (Burke et al., 2025). In economics, where women are under-represented, the “leaky pipeline” persists, with barriers particularly evident at mid-career transitions (e.g. Casad et al., 2021; Costa-Dias et al., 2023; Fagan & Teasdale, 2021; O’Connor, 2019). Gender bias and micro-inequities—such as being assigned undervalued tasks or receiving less recognition—continue to shape women’s academic experiences (Baker, 2001; Llorens et al., 2021).

Other individual factors that shape academic career development, include race and ethnicity (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Elhinnawy, 2022; Hussein & Hussain, 2020), socio-economic background (Kniffin, 2007; Lee, 2017; UCU, 2022), and dimensions such as disability, religion, and gender identity (Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022; Marsden, 2015; Taylor, 2020). Individuals from these groups often face barriers such as limited senior role models, workplace discrimination, and unequal access to development opportunities leading to persistent wage gaps, job insecurity, and underrepresentation in senior roles.

Importantly, the intersections between these characteristics can exacerbate disadvantage. Women from minoritised ethnic backgrounds face specific forms of exclusion that compound racism and sexism in unique ways (Bhopal, 2020; Elhinnawy, 2022). Mid-career working carers—often women—report particular difficulties in balancing professional, family and personal responsibilities and are more likely to suffer from impostor syndrome (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). For others, the intersections of class, health and other characteristics may intensify marginalisation.

Among contextual factors, sectoral conditions, university policies, disciplinary norms, and wider cultural contexts all influence how careers unfold (Zacher et al., 2019). Challenges affecting early-career academics such as publication pressure, limited autonomy, unclear progression pathways, and casualisation, remain relevant and potentially intensify at mid-career (Dore & Richards, 2024; Hollywood et al., 2020;

Khanijou & Zakariah, 2023). Additionally, mid-career academics often take more administrative responsibilities while mentorship opportunities diminish, as they are increasingly expected to provide support to others (Debowski, 2022; Pickard-Smith et al., 2023).

More recently, research starts highlighting the changing nature of the academic work and the increasing complexity of career development under these shifts. The rising sectoral demands may require academics to acquire a broader set of skills and institutions to develop mechanisms to support this transition (Debowski, 2022; Pickard-Smith et al., 2023).

Under this new paradigm, academics must actively construct their professional identities and narratives in order to progress (Brew et al., 2018; Debowski, 2022). Whitchurch et al. (2021b) describe this as a “concertina” career where academics dynamically expand and contract their professional activities and time in response to changing institutional and personal circumstances. This framing considers academic career development as fluid and multidimensional, rather than the trajectory typically implied by institutional promotion criteria. For mid-career academics, this fluidity can be particularly pronounced, as they often face the dual challenge of sustaining established professional roles while also redefining their identity and priorities in light of new expectations, opportunities, or constraints.

Understanding mid-career needs to become a priority. Evidence that how this stage is experienced significantly influences work patterns, effort, productivity, and job satisfaction (Baldwin et al. 2005). This also impacts later life experience: for instance, bad working conditions in mid-life have been linked to depressive symptoms after retirement (Wahrendorf et al., 2013). Mid-career workers (not only in academia) may experience emotional strain, including decreased job satisfaction (Clark et al., 1996), stalled progression, and questioning of purpose or professional identity (Brown, 2015). This resonates with the feelings of plateau, frustration, and uncertainty voiced by workshop participants, particularly when career progression routes appeared opaque. Reflective accounts from within academia echo these feelings and emphasise the emotional and existential dimensions of this stage (Rockquomore, 2012; Setiya, 2019).

3.3 The Rise of the Education Pathway and its Mid-Career Implications

All mid-career academics must navigate evolving institutional expectations; however, for those on education-focused roles the challenges of identity construction, professional fluidity, and structural complexity are magnified by the relative novelty of their roles and institutional ambiguity of their career pathway. Some of these challenges are already identified by the emerging literature on education-focused pathways. In particular, staff in these roles frequently report professional isolation, unclear expectations, and perceive lower professional status within their institutions (Bennett et al., 2018b; Smith & Walker, 2024, see also Bull et al., 2025 for a comprehensive review).

As more education-focused academics reach mid-career, the consequences of inadequate formal structures become increasingly visible. In many institutions, senior leadership has been slow to embrace the education pathway as a legitimate academic route, but in those institutions which have developed clear frameworks formally recognising educational expertise, staff report markedly more positive experiences (Bull et al., 2025), demonstrating how institutional commitment can positively shape career progression viability.

Without tailored development opportunities, role-specific leadership pathways, or succession planning, career advancement appears uncertain and fragmented. As a result, academics frequently chart their own routes to progression, experiencing the “concertina” career patterns and identity negotiations highlighted earlier, but compounded by evaluation criteria that rarely reflect education-focused work and fewer role models to lighten the way.

The evaluation criteria also differ across institutions. While research-focused pathways share broadly consistent foundations, i.e. publications in recognised journals, research grants, peer collaborations; education pathway criteria vary widely. Many institutions include scholarship as a core expectation, yet evaluators often lack a clear understanding of what this entails (see also Arico et al. 2024 for a discussion on economics). Ambiguity surrounds the relevance of disciplinary research for education-focused academics and how educational publications, or pedagogical contributions should be weighted, e.g. are they part of research or

teaching contributions. This uncertainty reinforces perceptions that education-focused roles are evaluated against shifting, uneven standards.

The individual experiences of mid-career academics on the education pathway are also far from uniform. Career progression is mediated by intersections of demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability and other social identities. These differences may be more salient for the education pathway, which is typically more demographically diverse than T&R routes in economics (Section 3.1). While this diversity can be a source of strength, the structural challenges of these roles may disproportionately disadvantage already minoritised groups, compounding existing inequities in recognition and progression. The result is a growing cohort of academics progressing along a professional route that exists in practice but remains only partially recognised in institutional policy. A pathway often informal, improvised, and invisible. These academics make substantial contributions to teaching quality, curriculum design, and student experience (Smith and Walker, 2024), yet their work frequently falls outside the traditional definitions of academic success.

Without consistent and transparent structures, the education-focused route risks being perceived as a “second tier” track marked by frustration, stagnation, and invisibility rather than opportunity and esteem. Universities must go beyond rhetorical commitments to *teaching excellence* and embed coherent frameworks that tangibly recognise and reward educational impact. Until then, the education pathway remains an “*unwritten path*”: vital but unacknowledged, active but undervalued.

3.4 The Unwritten Path in Economics: Navigating 'Publish or Perish' Culture

Academic career progression needs to be considered within disciplinary and institutional cultures that shape how academic work is defined and valued. The challenges encountered by academics at different stages of their careers are reinforced by rigid disciplinary norms and recognition structures that privilege narrowly defined outputs and linear trajectories (Treebak & Thomsen, 2022; Whitchurch et al., 2021). Within institutions, departments often function as semi-autonomous communities with their own norms and bureaucracies, shaping how success is defined and recognised (Austin, 1990; Becher, 1994). Institutional, departmental, and disciplinary cultures are often internalised by individuals (Ibarra,

1999), reinforcing rigid definitions of what a “successful” academic career should look like.

In economics, the “*publish or perish*” ethos continues to define academic success. Few journals, with a highly concentrated editorial power (Baccini & Re, 2025), dominate the discipline and strongly influence tenure and promotion decisions (Heckman & Moktan, 2020). This culture profoundly shapes what is recognised, rewarded, and resourced in economics departments, creating a disconnect between the work needed to sustain the broader academic ecosystem and the narrow metrics used to evaluate individual performance.

These metrics determine internal hierarchies, shape research agendas (Akerlof, 2020), affect staff wellbeing (Miller et al., 2011; Schneider, 2019), and influences who stays in academia and who exits (van Dalen, 2021, Moss et al., 2022, Xu, 2008) contributing to leaky pipelines and persistent pay gaps (Costa-Dias et al., 2023). They have also prompted ethical concerns about distorted incentive structures, academic integrity (Haley, 2017; Humphrey et al., 2019) and unequal access to opportunities (Foster et al., 2023; García-Suaza et al., 2020). While many disciplines wrestle with similar pressures, economics stands out for its insularity, prestige hierarchies, and resistance to change (Fourcade et al., 2015). Economists themselves have expressed dissatisfaction with the discipline’s culture (Grice & Paredes Fuentes, 2025).

In this environment—where researchers are willing to make extreme personal sacrifices, including giving up a limb for an *American Economic Review* publication (Attema et al., 2014)—it is unsurprising that economists across all pathways internalise these norms. Many come to perceive their value through these metrics, which in turn devalues educational contributions both in the eyes of institutions and of the academics themselves.

This disciplinary culture intersects with the already unclear structures for education-focused careers. While T&R staff in economics operates within well-defined benchmarks (however narrow), those in education-focused roles navigate inconsistent expectations. Although faculty in these roles are typically hired to alleviate teaching loads, departments also rely on their wider contributions such as pedagogical research, mentoring faculty on education practices, embedding best practices in teaching (Harlow et al., 2022). These contributions, along with

engagement in the wider education community, are rarely evaluated systematically, creating confusion about what counts and how it is assessed.

This concern was voiced by the participants at the Mid-Career Workshop who, despite balancing a wide range of responsibilities (teaching, mentoring, curriculum leadership, educational scholarship and student support), struggle to understand how their contributions would be evaluated. Some attempted to demonstrate impact by mimicking the T&R pathway: publishing papers, applying for grants, building national profiles, but without the infrastructure and support typically available to academics on this pathway.

Of course, many aspects of career development for education-focused economists overlap with those experienced by education-focused staff across the wider higher education sector. Yet, this discussion shows that the space in which education-focused economists build their careers sits at the unique intersection where sectoral trends, disciplinary norms, and career-stage dynamics converge. We expand on this in the next section.

Addressing these issues requires more than modest adjustments to promotion criteria. It demands a fundamental shift in culture and in how the discipline of economics understands and rewards academic contribution. Departmental leadership can and should play a central role, as they are best placed to mediate between the complexities of institutional structures and disciplinary norms. Without such a shift, those pursuing education-focused careers will remain on an “*unwritten path*”: essential to the academic community but continually undervalued by it.

4. Writing the Path: Conceptualising the Career Pathway for Economists in Education-Focused Roles

This section proposes a conceptual framework for understanding the career trajectories of economists in education-focused roles, integrating the empirical insights and theoretical perspectives discussed in previous sections.

The framework serves two purposes. First, it reveals how apparently fragmented individual experiences reflect broader systemic patterns. Economists in education-focused roles often describe a sense of dual marginalisation: their career trajectories diverge from those of T&R colleagues who benefit from established progression

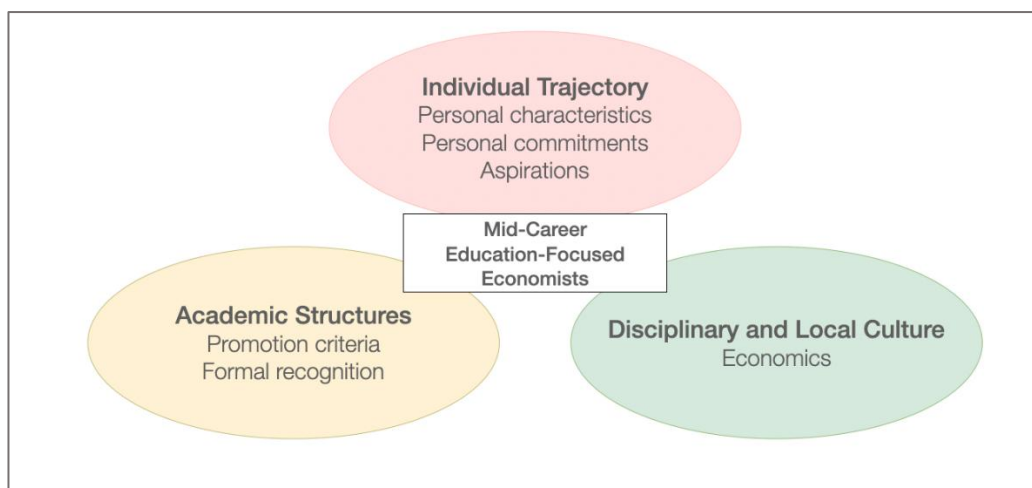
structures, while they also feel distinct from education-focused staff in other disciplines likely due to economics' particularly insular, hierarchical culture and narrow recognition systems.⁴ Second, the framework illuminates the contours of the “unwritten path,” explaining why this career route remains undefined and why navigating it can feel disorienting.

By demonstrating that these challenges are collective rather than individual, we aim to support mid-career economics educators experiencing stagnation and isolation, opening space for shared strategies that foster both personal development and systemic change.

4.1 A Conceptual Framework for Mid-Career Economics Educators

The academic mid-career stage is a dynamic phase marked by heightened teaching and leadership responsibilities, shifting institutional expectations, and evolving personal aspirations. We situate this period at the intersection of three dimensions: individual trajectory, academic structures, and disciplinary and local culture (Figure 8).

Figure 8: A Conceptual Framework for Explaining Mid-Career



⁴ While this discussion focuses on economics, the intention is not to claim disciplinary exceptionalism. Similar reflections may be valuable in other fields, as local disciplinary cultures shape how academics experience career progression and professional identity.

Individual trajectory

Mid-career academics arrive at this stage through diverse and often non-linear routes. Early career decisions, opportunities, and the gradual shaping of professional interest all influence career aspirations and professional identity. While early-career tends to be more structured, mid-career requires deliberate choices about direction and purpose.

Personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, class background, disability, etc, also shape experiences of progression, access to opportunities, and the challenges encountered along the way. As a result, the mid-career stage is marked by significant heterogeneity: individuals carry different histories, constraints, and motivations, producing a mosaic of trajectories rather than a single, standardised path.

Academic structures

Institutional frameworks for education-focused roles are frequently modelled on traditional research pathways, reproducing assumptions about academic value that misalign with the day-to-day realities of education-focused work. At mid-career, this lack of clarity can stall progression and fuel frustration and disengagement.

Yet structures can also be enabling. Institutions that establish robust frameworks for recognising educational leadership, supported by tangible development opportunities and senior leaders who understand the distinctive contribution of education-focused staff, foster stronger belonging and purpose among this staff.

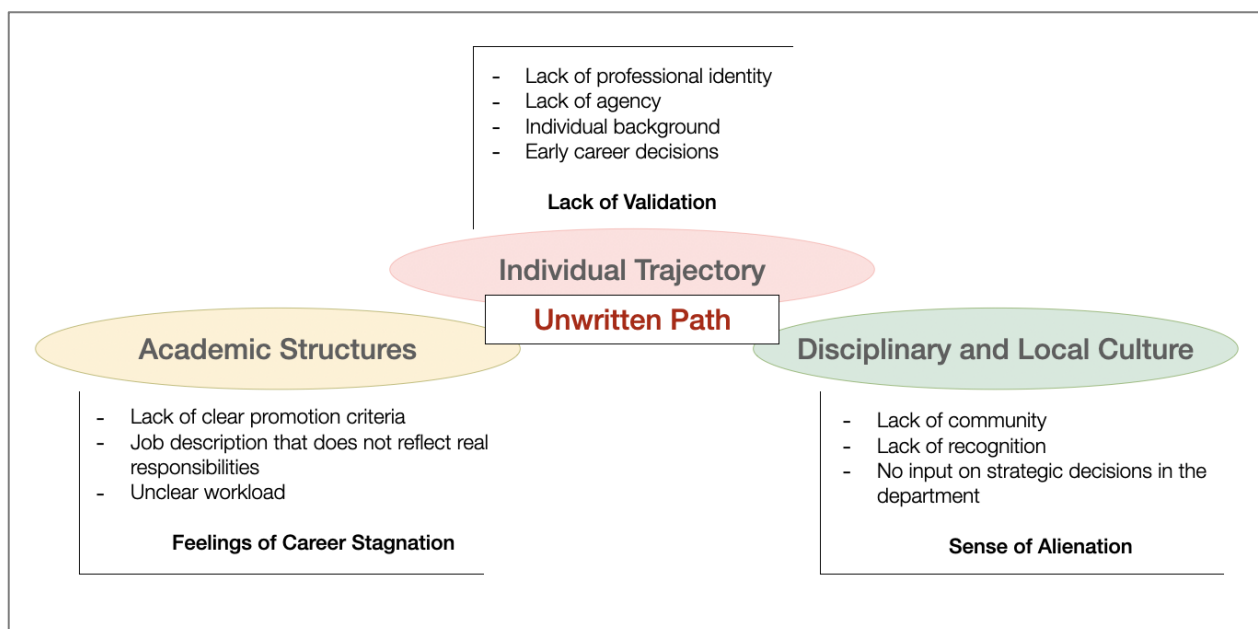
Disciplinary and Local Culture

Economics remains highly hierarchical with recognition systems that may reinforce feelings of marginalisation and alienation. However, disciplinary norms do not operate in isolation. Local and departmental cultures mediate how disciplinary hierarchies are enacted. Departments can reproduce broader hierarchies or actively challenge them by cultivating inclusive cultures where teaching and research are complementary. In the latter environment, education-focused staff are not only recognised but also integrated into leadership structures, strategic decision-making, and departmental identity.

These three dimensions delineate the contours of the career path for mid-career economists in education-focused roles. Using this framework, we can demonstrate that the “unwritten path” arises because personal trajectories unfold within structures and cultures that have not evolved to recognise or support them (Figure 9). It is the product of structural ambiguities, exclusionary disciplinary norms, and intersecting inequalities that creates lack of validation, alienation and feelings of career stagnation, impacting how individuals shape their career progression.

In particular, at individual level, when academics cannot develop coherent professional identities or exercise agency, maybe due to legacies of earlier career decisions, personal backgrounds, or other constraining factors, they may experience frustration and lack of validation. At institutional level, unclear promotion criteria, job descriptions misaligned with actual responsibilities, and opaque workload models can stall progression. At departmental level, absence of community, recognition, and opportunities to influence strategic decisions fosters alienation and disconnection.

Figure 9: From an “Unwritten Path” ...



Together these factors constitute the unwritten path. A career trajectory shaped by institutional and cultural omission rather than intentional design. It is not simply a documentation gap but a symptom of deeper systemic issues within both the evolving academic landscape and the enduring cultural norms of economics. Without structural and cultural change, this pathway will remain unwritten, and the talent, expertise, and innovation of mid-career education-focused economists will continue to be undervalued and underutilised.

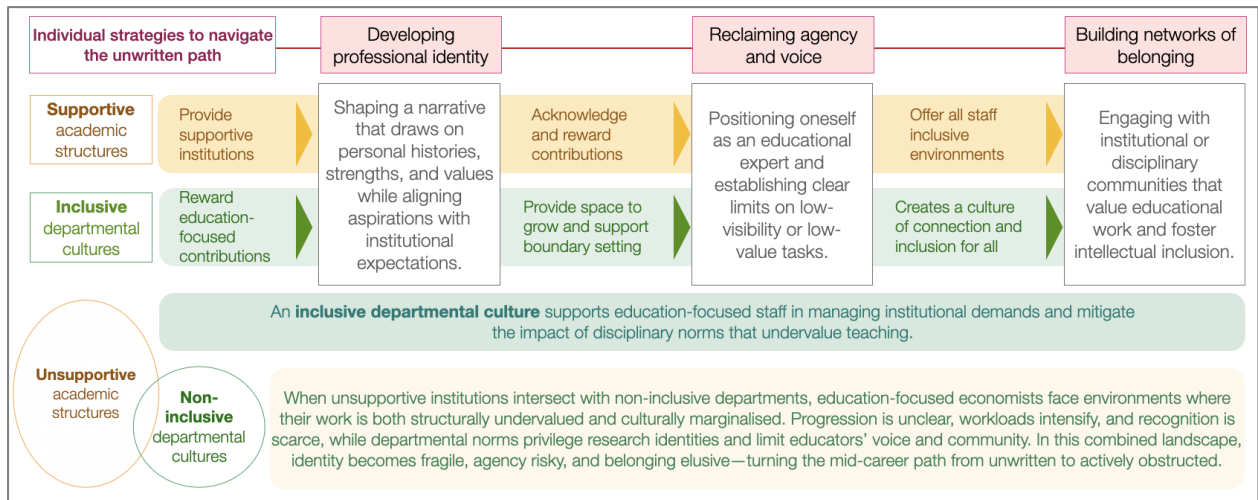
4.2 Moving forward: Navigating the Path

Despite the challenges, mid-career can also be a time of renewal: an opportunity for intentional redefinition, leadership growth, and deeper engagement with teaching and scholarship. While many structural factors remain beyond individual control, academics can begin to write their own paths in ways that foster their professional fulfilment and career development.

Building on a positive take of Whitchurch et al. (2021)'s concept of academic “concertina” career (Section 3), mid-career educators in economics can actively construct “*internal career scripts*,” i.e. self-defined frameworks that align own professional identities with personal aspirations while adapting to changing institutional contexts and navigating disciplinary cultural norms. Rather than viewing the fluidity of education-focused careers as destabilising, this approach may enable academics to strategically shape their trajectories by consciously expanding and contracting their activities in response to opportunities and constraints.

Figure 10 reconceptualises the same three dimensions to illustrate how a more navigable pathway can emerge. We now focus on what individuals can actively influence to navigate it more effectively. Specifically, we concentrate on three aspects within individual control: developing professional identity, exercising agency and voice, and cultivating belonging. Importantly, we recognise that these aspects interact with institutional structures and disciplinary culture and discuss how these interactions can be enablers or barriers for progression.

Figure 10: ... to a “Structured Path”



Developing professional identity

Economics educators must purposely develop their personal identities, and at their mid-career stage, this becomes crucial. They need to adapt their internal scripts. This involves developing narratives that capture how one's roles, motivations, and contributions advance both institutional goals and disciplinary practice. These narratives inevitably differ across individuals, reflecting personal histories, strengths, and values.

At this career stage, it is important to engage with educational leadership when opportunities arise, deepening engagement with pedagogical scholarship when feasible, or temporarily contracting activity to protect wellbeing while maintaining core commitments. In doing so, mid-career educators enact the “concertina” approach, transforming the uncertainty of an “unwritten path” into a generative space for autonomy and creative professional growth.

The capacity to craft a professional identity is strengthened when institutions and departments provide supportive frameworks for education-focused careers. When institutional structures are unsupportive, an inclusive departmental culture can partially offset these barriers by affirming identity development and creating space for growth. Conversely, when departmental culture is exclusionary, often mirroring wider disciplinary hierarchies, engagement with the broader institution (e.g. teaching and learning networks, education staff from other departments, or other institutional

initiatives) can offer alternative sources of support, recognition, and strategic guidance.

Reclaiming agency and voice

Agency, the capacity to act purposefully and influence one's professional trajectory, is central to navigating the unwritten path. In supportive environments, staff can pursue high-visibility projects, lead curriculum reforms, or initiate teaching innovations, knowing that these contributions are acknowledged and rewarded. However, in less supportive settings, agency may take more strategic and subtle forms.

Mid-career educators can begin claiming voice by repositioning themselves as educational experts rather than merely implementers. This involves adopting a scholarly approach to pedagogical innovations, curriculum design, and student experience, e.g. identify a teaching challenge or curriculum gap, research evidence-based solutions through engagement with pedagogical literature, implement interventions systematically, and document outcomes and impact. This mirrors the research process and generates tangible evidence of impact.

By framing educational work as inquiry-driven problem-solving and articulating it in various forums, such as departmental meetings, strategy discussions, and annual reviews, educators assert their voice as experts contributing specialised knowledge to the academic mission. This not only improves teaching quality but also creates narratives of expertise, making the intellectual work of teaching visible in ways that institutions and colleagues trained in research paradigms can recognise and value. Reclaiming agency also requires boundary-setting, i.e. declining undervalued work that drains energy and time without recognition, and negotiating workloads that reflect actual responsibilities. Of course, in non-supportive departments, such boundary-setting may carry risks and feel precarious. In these contexts, starting small becomes essential: document workload systematically, making invisible labour visible through emails summarising contributions and/or annual review submissions detailing all activities.

The concertina career concept applies here too: identify tasks where adequate rather than excellent work suffices, while redirecting energy toward activities that align with career aspirations and build your profile. This is not about shirking responsibilities

but about strategic allocation of finite time and energy towards what is genuinely valued and contributes to long-term career sustainability.

Building networks of belonging

How individuals perceive themselves and develop coherent professional identities is mediated by departmental structures and the social identities they inhabit. Ideally, all academics should work on environments they feel they belong. Departments that embrace parity, valuing education innovation alongside research, create communities where all academics thrive. Such environments enhance individual trajectories and strengthen the discipline's potential impact.

Yet, despite shared challenges, economics departments have historically struggled to build inclusive communities and create strong linkages between education-focused staff and colleagues across the wider university. This may reflect the discipline's insularity, rigid hierarchies, and resistance to change, which can leave education-focused economists professionally isolated.

Actively creating networks of belonging becomes especially important under these conditions. This can be achieved through participation in disciplinary and cross-disciplinary education networks offers educators spaces where education work is genuinely understood, and intellectually valued. Engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning provides both academic legitimacy and a shared language for articulating contributions. At departmental level, even one or two senior allies who recognise the legitimacy of educational work can provide crucial validation and strategic guidance.

Within the broader institution, connections with teaching and learning services, educational developers, or colleagues in other departments pursuing similar pathways can offer alternative sources of support and recognition when departmental culture proves exclusionary.

These forms of connection matter because belonging is not merely emotional: it enables clearer career navigation, fosters confidence in one's professional identity, and reduces the sense of precarity that often marks education-focused careers in economics.

4.3 Grounding the Framework: Insights from the Workshop

Feedback from the Mid-Careers Workshop provides empirical grounding for the strategies outlined above. Of the 30 participants, 18 completed the post-event feedback questionnaire, and 16 reported a positive experience. Their reflections clustered around the three dimensions of our framework, illuminating how mid-career educators in economics begin to write their own paths when given space to reflect collectively.

Most prominently, participants emphasised the value of peer connections for guidance and reassurance. When asked what they take out from the workshop, one noted: *“You are not alone, and there’s are lots of other people out there with superb experience willing to share those experiences...”*, reinforcing how belonging and shared insight help counter the isolation. Mentoring was also recognised as essential for navigating mid-career decisions, with few participants answering *“mentoring”* to the question “what support would be more valuable to you at this stage of your career?”, affirming our emphasis on identifying strategic relationships even in challenging institutional contexts.

Equally important was practical advice on evidencing teaching and educational leadership. Participants stressed that learning how to document impact and articulate their educational contributions gave them tools to make their work visible; an essential step in turning an unwritten pathway into one that feels navigable. Insights into funding opportunities, scholarships, and institutional variations in teaching-focused roles further helped participants to clarify options and regain a sense of direction. These forms of guidance reflect precisely the internal career scripts and concertina strategies that enable academics to stretch the boundaries of existing structures.

The workshop thus demonstrated that, when provided space to reflect collectively on professional trajectories, mid-career economics educators can identify actionable strategies for moving forward, even when the path remains unclear. Yet, it also reinforces a crucial point: individual navigation cannot substitute for institutional reform. The unwritten path remains unwritten because systemic ambiguities persist. Nevertheless, understanding how to navigate existing structures while advocating for their transformation remains essential. These strategies are not about accepting

inadequate conditions but about maintaining professional fulfilment while claiming legitimacy and demonstrating, through successful practice, what well-supported education-focused careers can look like. In doing so, mid-career economics educators collectively provide role models for junior colleagues and generate the very evidence needed to convince institutions to finally *write the path*.

5. Toward a Written Path: Some Recommendations

The insights from the Mid-Career Workshop were the catalyst for this paper. They gave voice to the quantitative patterns presented in Section 3, revealing the distinctive pressures facing mid-career economists in education-focused roles who have found their career trajectories defined by an *unwritten path* shaped by the interplay of individual trajectories, academic structures, and disciplinary culture. This paper provides a conceptual framework that explains why this path emerges. It also identifies some basic strategies: developing identity, claiming voice and agency, and building belonging, that speak directly to the needs participants articulated. The trajectories of senior economists in education-focused roles who contributed to facilitate the workshop sessions provided further evidence to these recommendations. Very few of them followed linear pathways. Instead, their careers reflect concertina-like movements across roles, sectors, and even disciplines, demonstrating both the challenges and possibilities of education-focused careers in economics.

Reflecting on the mid-career stage of academic progression is necessary and overdue. It is not only the longest part of an individuals' careers when they may need to consider professional reinvention to progress, but it can also be a particularly vulnerable life stage. This is often the period when academics are juggling caregiving responsibilities for children, aging parents, or other dependents; or even managing personal crises such as divorce or health challenges. These pressures exist across all academic pathways, but they become especially acute when career structures are unclear, and progression routes are ambiguous. When academics must simultaneously manage significant personal responsibilities and chart their own professional development without institutional guidance or support, the burden can feel overwhelming. The result is a compounding of stressors at precisely the career stage when stability and clarity become most valuable.

We aim for this paper to contribute to a wider conversation about how academia, and economics in particular, can better recognise diverse academic contributions while acknowledging the full complexity of academics' lives. Individual actions can enhance visibility, legitimacy and personal fulfilment for those on the education pathway and begin to shift disciplinary culture, but they cannot replace the required structural reforms.

Progress depends on moving beyond formal criteria. It is not enough to mention education careers in promotion documents. Institutions have to embed recognition in everyday practices and cultures. This requires improving the literacy of senior managers and promotion panels regarding the scope and impact of education on higher education; introducing transparent workload models and evaluation systems aligned with career advancement; developing robust mentoring and leadership pathways; and fostering supportive networks that help educators articulate their achievements in ways institutions recognise and value.

For economics, as a discipline, cultural change is essential. We must broaden our definition of excellence beyond narrow research metrics which has been demonstrated to have a negative impact on the discipline. We should aim for a full recognition of education excellence and integrate this expertise into departmental governance, disciplinary bodies, and professional leadership. This means valuing curriculum innovation, pedagogical scholarship, and student success alongside traditional research outputs. Without these changes, economics risks marginalising those who are shaping the next generation of economists and limiting the discipline's capacity to adapt to ever evolving educational needs.

This shift goes beyond individual careers and impacts equity and inclusion in the discipline. Education-focused pathways employ proportionally more individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, including women and academics from minoritised ethnic groups. Therefore, structural inequities in the career development of education-focused roles may disproportionately affect these groups reproducing and reinforcing existing inequalities within the discipline. Failing to support education-focused careers is not merely an oversight: it is a mechanism through which economics perpetuates exclusion.

Making the unwritten path visible requires commitment at multiple levels: from individual educators who claim expertise and build communities, to departments that

create inclusive cultures overcoming institutional and discipline limitations. Change is both urgent and possible. The growing community of mid-career education-focused economists represents substantial intellectual capital and pedagogical leadership. Their contributions deserve recognition not as secondary to the "real" work of economics but as integral to the discipline's mission and future. Finally, we hope this framework provides a source of validation to the lived experiences of mid-career economics educators who many times consider their challenges as personal failings instead of emerging from structural and cultural dynamics. While the practical strategies presented to navigate the pathway can support career development, individual resilience cannot compensate for institutional neglect. The path must be written clearly, equitably, and with genuine commitment to valuing the diverse forms of excellence that sustain academic life.

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