Teaching-Track Economists in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States [1]

Historically, academic economists' responsibilities include a mix of research, teaching, and service. We study a relatively new and evolving role: full-time, teaching-track economists who work in the same departments as traditional research-track economists, but with a greater emphasis on teaching. Teaching-track academics[2] are a growing phenomenon internationally (Rwan and Fox 2016; Smith and Walker 2022; Harlow et al. 2022; Godbold, Matthews, and Gannaway 2023).

In this study, we illuminate the current landscape of full-time, teaching-track economists in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States and characterize their role within each. A cohesive, cross-country, multi-institution comparison enables learning from the variety of teaching-track economist models and contexts. Hilmer and Hilmer (2020) document the prevalence and compensation of a narrowly defined group – "full-time non-tenure-track lecturers"[3] – during the 2010s at 30 doctoral-granting economics departments in the United States. The current literature answers key questions on teaching-track roles in higher education,

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[2] Titles vary and often include "Professor" but with a qualifier such as teaching, education, practice, clinical, or instruction. Other common titles are Lecturer and Senior Lecturer. While at some institutions all academic economists have quite teaching-intensive roles, we focus on institutions with two or more distinct full-time tracks. This also excludes more longstanding roles of contingent jobs to cover teaching gaps such as part-time or adjunct instructors at US institutions, sessional instructors in Canda, and some on fixed-term contracts at UK institutions.

[3] Hilmer and Hilmer (2020) define full-time lecturers as those "who are contracted to teach classes without having specific research requirements and without the possibility for receiving tenure".

yet a significant gap remains regarding how these roles manifest, evolve, and impact the discipline of economics.

We conducted extensive one-on-one interviews and ran a wide-scale survey with teaching-track economists, which we analyzed with qualitative and quantitative tools. A mixed-methods approach provides insights into the varied experiences and career stories of teaching-track economists and offers a view of the teaching-track landscape from the perspective of those who hold these roles. We identified key themes and findings regarding the prevalence of teaching-track economists, their job characteristics, job security, financial compensation, and community/networks.

While relatively new, there is now over a decade of experience with full-time teaching-track economists in multiple countries, making this an ideal moment to reflect. The next three papers in these *AEA Papers and Proceedings* offer more nuanced insights about each country. Collectively, the papers shed light on the work teaching-track economists do, the institutional environments in which they operate, and the challenges they face. Our findings allow those in these roles to compare their circumstances and experiences to those of the broader community of teaching-track economists, learn about differing teaching-track careers available internationally, and identify common challenges. Our work explores this track as a viable career option, which helps those advising doctoral students and those mentoring teaching-track economists become more informed and effective. Further, by sharing information about various designs of teaching-track roles, we help academic leaders as they consider introducing or refining teaching-track roles locally. This continuing shift in faculty composition is worthy of study as it affects resource allocations and the many students who these faculty members teach.

I. A Mixed-Methods Approach with Original Data

We chose a mixed methods approach, with qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and a quantitative study of a wide-scale survey. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that qualitative analysis is especially useful to explore an unknown landscape, to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences, and to complement survey analysis for topics that elude meaningful quantitative measurement. Further, qualitative results helped us in the design of more meaningful and less ambiguous survey questions. We briefly describe this mixed-methods approach in this section, devoting more discussion to qualitative analysis, which is uncommon in economics. For more details about the methods and data collection see online Appendices A and B.

To recruit interviewees, we used a purposive sampling design[4] to identify teaching-track economists at various institution types with a known use of teaching-track economists. In contrast to quantitative analysis of survey data, what is critical to our qualitative analysis is appropriate *representation* – a variety of interviewees to capture differing views – rather than *representativeness* – the sample proportions of types of interviewees match the population proportions (Palinkas et al. 2015).

In April and May 2023, we interviewed 77 teaching-track economists: 24 in Canada in 7 institutions, 36 in the United Kingdom in 20 institutions, and 17 in the United States in 11 institutions. Relative to typical qualitative research, the numbers for Canada and the United Kingdom are high, and we discuss saturation for all countries below. Ninety-five percent of the interviewees hold a PhD, 51 percent are females, and average more than a decade of experience in a teaching-track career.

[4] Purposive sampling is a main recruitment approach in qualitative research. Participants are chosen for their experience and knowledge about the research matter and their willingness and ability to talk about it in a reflective way (Palinkas et al. 2015).

The ten members of our research team conducted one-on-one, semi-structured[5], online interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Interview recordings were transcribed and anonymized. A non-economist, non-teaching track, expert analyzed interview transcripts using thematic template analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; King 2004) and the software package NVivo. The use of a researcher well-versed in qualitative techniques, but neither an economist nor in a teaching-track position, is intended to reduce confirmation bias stemming from the experiences and perceptions of the research team. In conversation with the research team, the expert identified overarching themes through reflection and interpretation of the text. Based on the content of the interviews, the research team is confident that they achieved a point of saturation during the process.[6] Themes from the qualitative analysis informed subsequent survey question selection and design.

To generate the survey distribution list of teaching-track economists, we searched department websites and made some inquiries. The relevant scope was departments with at least two distinct full-time roles for faculty members, where one is that of teaching-track economist. Using the software package Qualtrics, in July and August 2023, we invited 1,257 teaching-track economists: 73 across 20 Canadian institutions, 249 across 39 UK institutions, and 935 across 205 US institutions. We achieved response rates of 44, 36, and 23 percent for Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Of our respondents, 307 indicate being full time, which forms our analysis samples of 31, 84, and 192. Approximately 54 percent of respondents identify as male and 43 percent as female. Eighty-seven percent hold an Economics PhD and the remainder a PhD in another discipline or a master's degree.

[5] Semi-structured interviews follow an interview guide with common relatable questions but allow interviewees to freely expand on themes within the given structure (Knott et al. 2022).

[6] In general, saturation is when further data gathering adds little new insight for the research question (Charmaz 2014).

II. Results

We report results from the interviews and survey in concert. Our data and analysis allow us to identify phenomenon, but not necessarily explain why our findings occur. Given space constraints, we offer select findings from these rich and dual data. Interview quotes represent themes from our qualitative analysis and are examples of a larger body of text representing each theme. The qualitative analysis both critically informs the design of the survey questions and enriches the interpretation of the survey results. Further, the results from the thematic analysis are especially valuable for gaining a nuanced understanding of issues not conducive to closed-form survey questions, such as status and experiences in diverse contexts. For the survey results reported in this section, refer to online Appendix C for more details, including statistical tests.

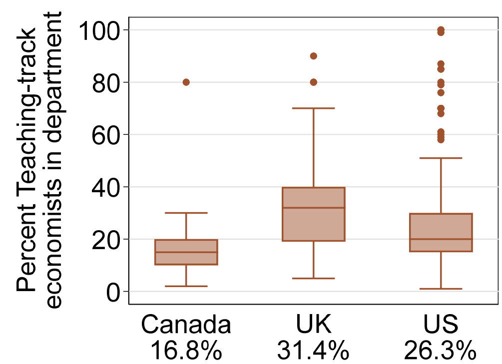

Figure 1. Percent Teaching-Track Economists

Notes: The survey asks: "To the best of your knowledge, what percentage of economics faculty members in your department are in a full-time, teaching-focused position or have a teaching-focused contract?" Boxes show 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles (with whiskers and outside values also shown), and below the country name is the mean value.

A. Prevalence, Perceived Reasons for Hire, and Pioneering

In the survey, teaching-track economists estimate that, on average, they constitute 17, 31 and 26 percent of economics department faculty members for Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Figure 1 shows that, conditional on having a teaching track (i.e. excluding zeros), prevalence varies substantially among departments within countries, and across countries.

Table 1 reports on survey participants' perceptions about their department's motivations for hiring them, their roles, and how they contribute to the departmental production function. It shows both differences and similarities. While the dominant reason for being hired is to teach specific courses, there is a greater perception in the United Kingdom and Canada of a mandate to improve teaching quality and pedagogy.

Table 1. Perceived Departmental Motivations for Hire

Some categories; respondents check all that apply	Percent		
	CA	UK	US
Teach specific courses	77.4	69.0	83.9
Improve teaching quality	61.3	50.0	39.6
Improve knowledge of education pedagogy in department	25.8	23.8	8.9
Cover teaching needs given growing enrollments	51.6	50.0	47.4
Increase number with a teaching focus to reduce research staff teaching load	29.0	32.1	28.1
Serve in an administrative role, (e.g., director of undergrad programs)	12.9	21.4	16.7

An important theme to emerge from the interviews is a sense of potential gains from specialization, which could motivate hiring. A US interviewee illustrates: *"It's positive for students … they get … more innovative teaching practices per class than they would otherwise. And [if] … research faculty have … fewer classes that they're expected to teach … they can be more productive … It's not unlike economists to think about the merits of comparative advantage."*[7]

A notable theme across all three countries is that some early teaching-track economists served as pioneers in shaping how these positions are defined and integrated into departmental structures. For example, a US interviewee said: *"When I first came here, I got to sort of invent my position because they hadn't really imagined what we would do other than teach."* And a UK interviewee recalls their first promotion: *"I … sweated for it … I was the first one promoted in the department on this track that was created [around] the same time as I was applying for it. And since then, people have progressed on the same track. But I was, for a while, a pathfinder."*

[7] We edit quotes from the transcribed transcripts with ellipses and shorter phrases in square brackets to remove the natural repetition and extraneous words that occur with spoken, impromptu replies.

B. Job Characteristics

The thematic analysis of the interviews reveals differing models to conceptualize key roles and defining features of teaching-track economists. Responsibilities and job characteristics vary both within countries and across countries. Two prominent themes capture aspects of distinct models: one where leadership and administrative roles are paramount, and another where the job of a teaching-track economist solely involves direct teaching responsibilities. A UK interviewee illustrates the first role: *"I have to be in some kind of leadership … position with some admin job … otherwise I don't think … I'm doing my job."* A Canadian interviewee also illustrates some of the job characteristics of the first role: *"[For my position there is the] educational leadership component, which comprises [many] different things … it can include curriculum development, … pedagogical research … developing new technologies to teach economics or tools in evaluating or assessing them."* Yet, another Canadian interviewee illustrates the second role: *"My appointment is 100 percent teaching, theoretically. So, I am supposed to just do teaching … for me, that means eight courses a year."* Yet, there is overlap. One US interviewee's statement illustrates: *"I also have the admin role of Director of Undergraduate Studies. So, my role is two parts [but] one is definitely a lecturer/senior lecturer, which is more teaching focused."*

Table 2 summarizes survey reports of teaching-track economists time allocation. While teaching is the largest task in all countries, it comprises less than two-thirds of working time in Canada and the United States and less than half of working time in the United Kingdom. This is consistent with the

Table 2. Percentage Time Allocations

	Mean Percentage		
	CA	UK	US
Teaching	60.7	48.6	63.3
Pedagogical research/scholarship	9.1	10.6	4.5
Economic research/scholarship	4.6	11.3	7.4
Service/citizenship	11.6	9.6	11.4
Administrative/managerial	10.1	19.8	10.1
Other (e.g. professional development)	3.6	2.4	3.3

Ansburg, Basham, and Gurung (2022) finding that US teaching-track faculty make contributions in scholarship and service, in addition to teaching. UK respondents devote substantially more time to administration and both pedagogical and economic research.

Given the sizable fraction of time allocated to teaching, we explore teaching activity in more depth. The average number of students taught in a year is substantial: 980 for Canada, 507 for the United Kingdom and 653 for the United States. Only about one-third of teaching time is spent on first-year undergraduate courses: teaching-track economists teach across the curriculum, including upper-level field courses, and in the United Kingdom a sizeable portion of teaching time is for graduate courses (17 percent). A theme from the interviews is that teaching-track economists generally accept an emphasis on large compulsory courses as part of their job description. A Canadian interviewee illustrates this in reporting: *"It is expected that I'll take on more of the first- and second-year teaching."*

C. Job Security, Expectations, Clarity, and Fragility

A striking cross-country difference emerges around whether teaching-track positions are tenurable. Figure 2 shows high rates of tenure or tenure eligibility for teaching-track economists in Canada (97 percent) and the United Kingdom (86 percent)[8], but very low rates in the United States (12 percent). An important theme from the qualitative analysis is the variability and degree of formal job security across institutions and countries. For example, an interviewee from Canada says: *"I was giving a talk at a US university … and people were saying … their contracts are one year at a time … But it's not the case [in Canada], we have five or six-year contracts and … when you're up for tenure … [the] process is the same for both the teaching faculty and the research faculty."*

[8] In the United Kingdom, academic economists on either a research track or a teaching track have open-ended *continuous* appointments, and these are regarded as tenure equivalent.

Despite non-universal tenure possibilities, promotion opportunities exist across all three countries. Among survey respondents in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, 97, 99, and 86 percent have either future opportunities for promotion or have already been promoted.

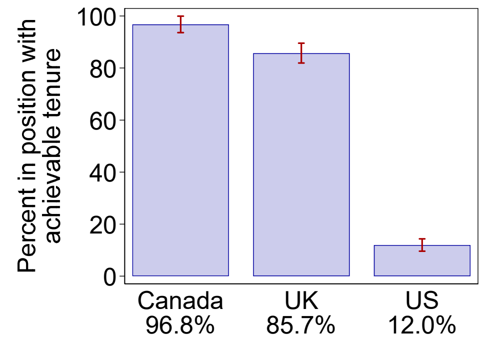

Figure 2. Achievable Tenure/Equivalent

Notes: The survey asks: "At your current institution, which best describes the highest level of employment security achievable given your current full-time academic appointment?" Figure shows percent selecting "Tenure or its equivalent, which assures continued employment similar to those in traditional research-focused positions (e.g., Senior Lecturer with Security of Employment)" with standard errors.

The qualitative results, however, indicate that respondents perceive promotion requirements lack clarity and are subject to interpretation, supporting a theme of ambiguity and vagueness about the role and expectations across countries. A Canadian teaching-track economist says: *"Our description of performance is quite vague… You're supposed to show excellence… But how do you define excellence?"* A UK interviewee says: *"[Now] a set framework is written down… You have to produce things that are visible at the department level, then the university level. But there's enough flexibility to do…what interests you. That flexibility also makes things a bit more blurry."* For other illustrations of this theme a UK respondent discussing the promotion criteria says, *"I have that 20 percent of scholarship…but is not really well defined"* and a respondent from Canada discusses the *"somewhat nebulously defined educational leadership component."* From the survey, when asked if they agree with the statement "As a teaching-focused faculty member, the requirements for renewal of contract or tenure promotion are clear," only 61 percent in Canada agree and even fewer, 54 and 50 percent, agree in the United States and United Kingdom. Yet, those in the role recognize the challenges of improving clarity for the teaching track. A UK respondent states: *"It's quite hard to say exactly what you need to have* *done ... The tricky thing with the teaching track is the heterogeneity of it. If the requirement is impact on student experience and teaching, there [are] so many different ways you can do that."*

Table 3 reports on the relative percentage weights of various categories in promotion decisions as perceived by survey respondents. Stark differences emerge across countries. In the United Kingdom, the model of a teaching-track economist seems less about being a "teaching-delivery-specialist" and more of a multifaceted role that includes significant expectations for administration, research, and scholarship. Figure 3 shows there is also substantial variation *within* countries in the perceived weighting of teaching in decisions affecting career progression.

Table 3. Perceived Percentage Weight for Promotion

	Mean Percentage		
	CA	UK	US
Teaching	62.4	34.2	66.3
Pedagogical research/scholarship	10.2	18.6	3.3
Economic research/scholarship	4.8	12.2	4.5
Service/citizenship	11.5	14.5	12.0
Administrative/managerial	5.3	21.6	8.0
Other (e.g. professional development)	5.8	3.6	3.6

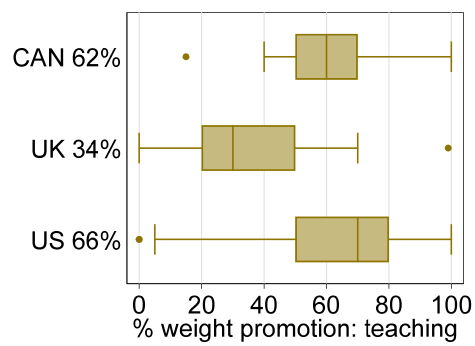

Figure 3. Percent Weight of Teaching in Promotion Decisions

Perceptions of institutional vagueness translate into an unmistakable theme across countries that current departmental leadership is of paramount importance. A US interviewee illustrates: *"The role of the teaching faculty in a department is very dependent upon who the department chair is. And that can change ... radically when there is a change in department chair. The institutional structure ... is kind of left to ... the chair's discretion. And so, it becomes 'what does the chair want?'"* When presented with the statement "When departmental leadership changes, I worry about the impact on my position," about half of the survey respondents in all three countries agreed or strongly agreed.

The qualitative evidence is compelling that there are specific challenges for teaching-track economists. For another example, a UK respondent states, *"I think [we] would struggle if the next head of department just doesn't really care about teaching whatsoever."*

D. Seniority, Work Hours, and Financial Compensation

The average years in a teaching-track career is higher in the United States (14 years) and Canada (11 years) compared with the United Kingdom (8 years). Canada has the highest fraction who are pre-promotion to tenure or its equivalent.[9] Reported hours worked in a typical week are highest in Canada at 52 hours, compared with 47 and 46 hours in the United Kingdom and United States.

Figure 4 compares annual salaries, with a basic adjustment for purchasing power parity. This gives another lens for viewing the composition of our survey sample. Among our surveyed teaching-track economists, reported salaries are significantly higher in Canada and the United States relative to the United Kingdom.[10] There is extensive variability in earnings within each country and there may be compensating differentials operating both within and across countries. When asked if financial compensation is appropriate relative to workload, 55 and 54 percent of Canadian and US survey respondents agreed, while in only 39 percent of UK

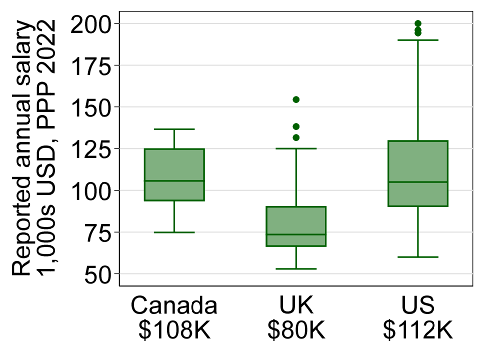

Figure 4. Cross-country salaries

Notes: The survey asks: "What is your current annual salary?" (in British pounds, Canadian dollars, or US dollars). The PPP conversion factors – 1.23 and 0.68 for Canada and the UK – are from the World Bank for the year 2022.

[9] Conditional on being in a position where tenure or its equivalent is possible, the percent who are yet to be promoted is 47 percent in Canada, versus 13 and 26 percent in the United Kingdom and United States.

[10] This UK/North American salary differential is well-known among research-track economists in the United Kingdom.

respondents agreed. While our data do not allow definitive conclusions about compensation, they do provide a vital starting point for further inquiry.

E. Belonging, Community, Networks, and Overall Satisfaction

Perceived status relative to research-track economists is a prominent theme in the interviews across countries. One variation on this theme is a perception of second-class status within the department, while another is a perception of collegial integration of both tracks of economists where teaching-track economists feel a sense of belonging and fulfilment from being valuable contributors to the departmental production function. For example, a US interviewee said: *"Sometimes that line [between teaching-track and research-track economists] is blurred and there's a very nice collegial atmosphere, and sometimes it is made explicitly clear [there are] differences and that teaching faculty are really second-class faculty… 'you just shut up and teach and generate the revenue for us and understand you're fully replaceable.'"* An economist in the United Kingdom says: *"A teaching fellow is really valued in the department … I'm involved in quite a lot of the decisions in terms of teaching and … [it] is really valued."* Even among teaching-track economists who feel well integrated, some perceive this is not a given. A US interviewee reports that, *"Some departments … separate lecturers and tenured faculty … put them in different offices … clear separation. Here they put everybody together."* And a Canadian interviewee illustrates how fuller integration may still be a work-in-progress: *"[Perspectives are] shifting [from] a second-class category and towards … being a … different kind of academic staff … important long-term employees, which we are … and who deserve to have a seat at the table … especially when the concern is teaching."*

Our thematic analysis of the interviews reveals a desire to connect beyond departmental boundaries, and that networks are important for identifying and informing external referees for career advancement decisions, sharing ideas, and finding support from others in these evolving positions. Regarding the role of external referees, a UK interviewee points out a challenge: *"It is quite difficult to connect with others enough that they can actually comment on your work… [as] a lot of teaching work is very internal facing."* A US interviewee articulates the utility of the wider community for scholarly work[11]: *"Being involved in the econ ed community … go to conferences and present … helps you be a better teacher. … It's a healthy, productive thing to do. And it makes my job not feel like a dead-end job."* A UK interviewee discusses the benefits of a teaching-track economist community: *"Internal and external support is important. Something that is missing just now. That's why I was quite keen to contribute [to this study] … because I think building communities, or at least reflecting [about] what we are and where we're going, would be really helpful.*"

In the survey, only in the United Kingdom did a majority (68 percent) agree with the statement "I network with teaching-focused faculty from other institutions," compared with 48 and 38 percent in Canada and the United States. The theme of formal institutions supporting networking is most pronounced in the UK interviews, including discussion of the Economics Network (https://economicsnetwork.ac.uk) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics (CTaLE, https://ctale.org/). Perhaps not unlike research-track economists working in new, emerging, and/or interdisciplinary fields, status, belonging, community, and networks for teaching-track economists may develop with time and effort.

While the responses to a single survey question certainly cannot sum up the experiences of teaching-track economists, it is interesting to see how those in these relatively new and

[11] Interviewees discussed economics teaching conferences, like the UK Developments in Economics Education conference that started in 2001 and the US Conference on Research and Teaching in Economic Education that started in 2011.

evolving roles answer an overall satisfaction question. When asked the extent to which they agreed with "Overall, I am satisfied with my job" on a five-point Likert scale, 90.3, 77.4, and 79.6 percent of respondents in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States either agreed or strongly agreed. However, those numbers drop to only 45.2, 22.6, and 30.4 percent for strongly agree.

III. Concluding Remarks

In this first international study of teaching-track economists, we bring clarity to a previously murky view of the landscape across three countries. We offer a snapshot of what has become a viable career track for economists and provide a point of reference as the teaching-track position continues to evolve. We use two rich sources of information – in-depth interviews and a large-scale survey – and employ a mixed-methods approach. This provides valuable context that informs decision-making processes and initiates conversations among multiple constituents, including teaching-track economists themselves. Our findings generate ideas, raise salient questions, and identify relative strengths and weaknesses of different teaching-track models.

Based on our research, we have characterized teaching-track economists in a single, simplified headline for each country. Canada: Full amenities of academics, passionate focus on quality and quantity of teaching, with pioneers and a new generation addressing challenges. United Kingdom: Nearly a third of faculty, strong parallels to research track, most diverse portfolio of responsibilities – including scholarship and administration – and well-established networks. United States: Vast within-country variation in definition of role and financial compensation, limited formal job security, and heavy focus on teaching provision. But each country has a richer story with subtleties and variations beyond what a headline can capture. The subsequent three papers present further insights for Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

This project's future trajectory includes several areas for further analysis. This includes expanded qualitative analysis of the interviews, thematic analysis of two open-ended survey questions, exploration of additional survey questions, and heterogeneity analysis, such as across types of institutions and by gender. Further, complementary literature and data sources, such as publicly disclosed salary data, can allow benchmarking of our results.

While many questions remain unanswered or partially addressed, we start this important exploration with the most comprehensive study of teaching-track economists to date.

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