

National University of Singapore

Improving the educator-track career pathway

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is a large, comprehensive, research-intensive university, home to around 40,000 students and 2,500 full-time academic staff. Over the past two decades, the university has sought to strengthen its reputation as a global leader in high impact research. This increased emphasis on research has led to a bifurcation of academic roles, with academics increasingly being either research-focused or teaching-focused, accompanied by a widespread perception that research is more valued than teaching.

In part to address this issue, NUS introduced a teaching-only career pathway in 2008, which was reframed as an 'educator track' in 2015. The 2015 reforms sought to reinforce the status of the educator track, through improving the incentives for academics following this pathway, including enabling the progression to Full Professor with tenure. Despite these changes, challenges with the educator track remained, including:

- » A lack of clarity about the pathways available for progression, due in large part to the lack of explicit promotion criteria to describe teaching achievement at each 'rung' of the career ladder.
- » The limited range of evidence sources available to evaluate teaching achievement, with an over-reliance on student ratings, widely perceived at the institution as 'fake-able'.
- » Ongoing concerns about the quality of external review and benchmarking of candidates' teaching achievement, leading to a perception that promotion based on teaching was less 'rigorous' than promotion based on research.
- » A lack of clarity as to the place of 'research' in career progression; whether those on the educator track should be research-active, and if so, whether this should be 'pedagogical' research or discipline-specific research.

Taken together, these factors militated against the institutional respect the educator track was intended to inspire.

In late 2015, the NUS Provost's Office (PVO) set up a task force, with representatives from across the university, to examine the challenges associated with the educator track and propose a way forward. Their proposals for change focused on ensuring that the educator track provided a clear and well-articulated pathway for career advancement and offered parity of esteem and harmonization with the university's tenure track. The Career Framework for University Teaching played a central role in guiding the revisions to the educator track and its associated career development policy. The reforms taken forward included:

- » The articulation of clear promotion criteria at each stage in the career pathway.
- » A clear emphasis on the candidate's sphere of impact in teaching and learning, including impact on their academic colleagues, the scholarship of teaching and learning and the institutional environment.
- » The establishment of opportunities to integrate 'research' into the role, whether in the candidate's disciplinary fields or oriented towards their teaching practice. Inspired by the Career Framework, two non-mutually exclusive, strength-based pathways for promotion were taken forward in the educator track, one in research/scholarship and one in educational leadership.
- » The identification of valid and reliable sources of evidence through which to demonstrate candidates' teaching achievements and to be documented through a teaching portfolio.
- » An external review of candidates' teaching achievements, including (where relevant) pedagogical scholarship, by an external review panel consisting of global experts in learning and teaching.

The first promotion round under NUS's new policy for the education-focused track has recently been completed. With it has come valuable feedback from the external review panel, as well as from faculty and school representatives. The increase in number of promotion cases submitted under the revised educator track suggests that greater clarity in criteria, evidence, and requirements for progression provided has been achieved.

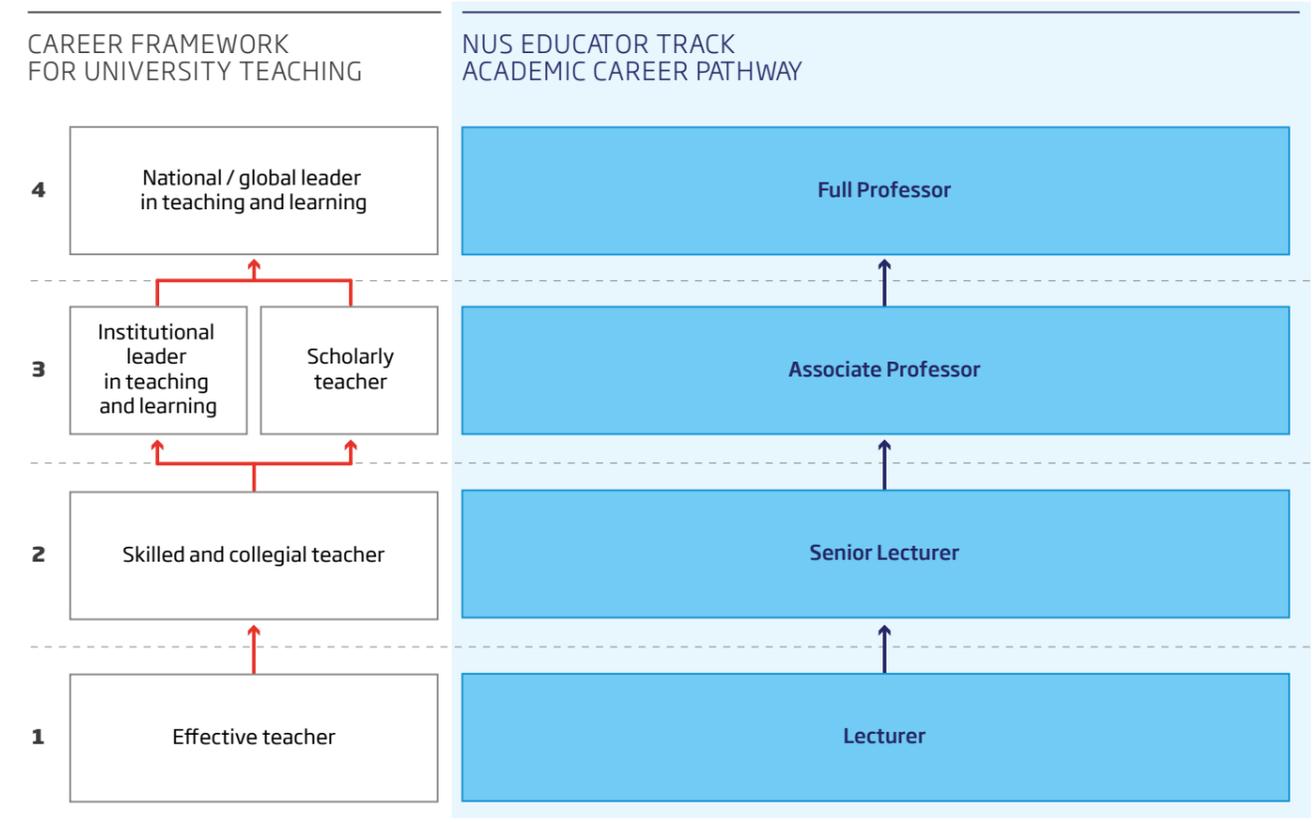


Figure: The relationship between the levels of the Career Framework for University Teaching and the levels of NUS's new educator track career pathway