

## Mapping the values and identities of academics who teach into widening participation university preparation programs

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### Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### Abstract

Practitioners who teach into university/tertiary preparation programs play an important role in widening and maintaining participation by delivering foundation programs for dealing with educational inequalities. Yet, there is limited research on how these practitioners conceptualise and frame their multiple roles, values and identities. Therefore, this study explored what it means to be a contemporary tertiary preparation practitioner at an Australian university. Ten academics who teach into university preparation programs co-constructed concept maps representing perceptions about their roles. These maps were then analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in perceptions. The findings highlighted that although practitioners were motivated by a desire to improve social mobility, this conflicts with the neoliberal demands of education as a commodity. There was also the perception that the tertiary preparation area sits at the periphery of higher education, which contributes to its perceived lack of prestige as an academic discipline.

# Full paper

## Introduction

Non-schools-based, widening participation university preparation programs represent some of the alternative pathways to higher education study (Pitman et al., 2016). Pathways models differ across nations, but examples include access courses in the UK, community college access programs in the USA, and tertiary preparation programs in Australia (Baker et al., 2022). Such programs provide training in study skills, communication, numeracy, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Syme et al., 2021). A diverse, non-traditional student population usually enrolls in tertiary preparation courses (Hopkins, 2021).

Research has found that tertiary preparation practitioners face different challenges to teachers within other academic areas. The role has been highlighted as involving greater emotional labour than that experienced by other academics (Crawford et al., 2018; Henderson-Brooks, 2021). Many of these roles are occupied by academics who, in addition to playing this crucial preparatory role in widening participation, have the same responsibilities as academics who teach into undergraduate and postgraduate programs. However, despite the importance of this role there is limited research on how practitioners conceptualise and frame their multiple roles, values and identities. Understanding personal values in higher education is vital, because values can shape academics' approaches to their jobs (Lygo-Baker, 2017). The current study therefore aims to explore what it means to be a tertiary preparation practitioner.

## Method

Ten academics who teach into widening participation tertiary preparation programs at a regional university in Australia participated in concept map-mediated interviews. Using an unstructured interview approach based around the question, *What does it mean to be a tertiary preparation practitioner?*, each participant co-constructed a concept map with the interviewer. Concept maps consist of nodes (concepts) joined together by

statements explaining how those concepts are connected (Heron et al., 2018). Maps are expected to represent the interviewee’s individual perceptions about a domain and are “analogous to collecting a rich interview transcript” (Kinchin et al., 2018, p. 341). Concept maps were then analysed using an inductive form of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

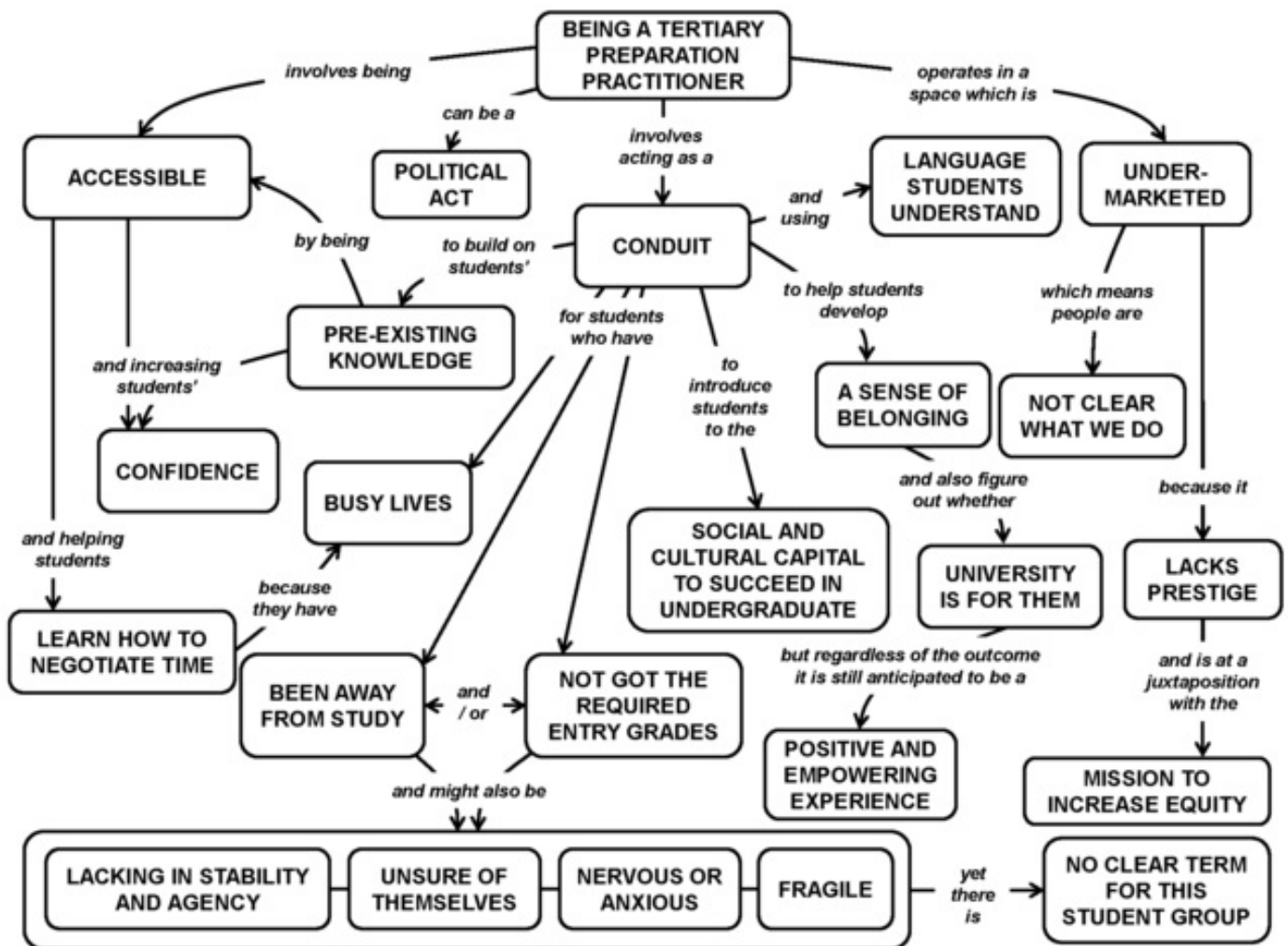


Figure 1. Example concept map representing what it means to be a tertiary preparation practitioner

## Findings

Participants depicted their roles as occupying a space at a “border area of the academy” (P8), sitting on the “periphery” (P3, P4), and

operating within a “sub-academic space” (P2). This sense of being separate from the usual university business meant that some participants defined themselves more by their teaching specialism (e.g. maths), than as a tertiary preparation practitioner specifically. Some participants noted that this often leads to the role being “not understood by others” (P1), because it is “not clear what we do” (P6). This potentially contributes to it “lack[ing] prestige” (P6) as an academic discipline.

The role was also viewed as fulfilling a particularly important “community service” (P2) for a “distinct cohort” (P5). Interestingly, while participants acknowledged that many of the students served by these programs are “low SES” (P2, P5) and have “specialised needs” (P8), one participant commented that due to the diversity and complexity of the students’ backgrounds, there is “no clear term for this student group” (P6). Therefore, there is a need to look at each student “holistically” (P10). Working in this space was highlighted as being “fundamental to the university’s role in supporting educational access” (P3) and “motivated by social justice issues” (P9). Yet, being a practitioner was not simply seen as contributing to social equity; it was described as a “political act” (P6), in which practitioners need to become “freedom fighter[s]” (P4) as part of the “mission to increase equity” (P6). University preparation programs were seen as having the power to “change [students’] lives” (P5) and lead to “transformation” (P10).

Efforts to contribute to widening participation were also portrayed as conflicting with wider requirements of the role. Practitioners may “function as a canary in the neoliberalised workspace” (P8) where there is still the expectation to “maintain standards” (P8) and treat students as “clients” (P4) in order to “sell a product” (P9) and ensure “value for money” (P4).

## **Conclusions**

While attempts to improve social mobility were seen to be core to the values of a tertiary preparation practitioner, this is perceived to be in conflict with the other functions of the role. By being positioned at the fringes of higher education, there is the perspective that there

is a lack of transparency about the important work done by practitioners. Furthermore, the increasing neoliberalisation of higher education only seeks to work against practitioners' capacity to mobilise a more defined identity for themselves and enhanced student access to higher education.

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