

Capability, Belonging and Equity in Higher Education:

Developing inclusive approaches

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Executive summary



The problem with 'potential'

This project makes a unique contribution to understanding the more subtle dimensions of equity in higher education by examining constructions of 'capability' and experiences of 'belonging'.

Student equity in higher education is framed by constructions of capability that imply that intelligence, potential and ability is innate. The assumption that underpins many national widening participation agendas, namely that all students *with the potential* to benefit from higher education should have fair access to higher education *regardless of social background*, is problematic (Archer & Leathwood 2003). The problem rests in the suggestion that 'potential' to benefit from higher education is an attribute that can be straightforwardly identified in order to ensure fair access. It also implies that potential to benefit from higher education is about natural talent, ability and/or intelligence and is detached from social, cultural and educational dis/advantage and inequalities (Morley & Lugg 2009, p. 41).

The project

This mixed methods project draws on extant data from a 2014 pilot study examining students' beliefs about ability, intelligence and how this is related to levels of confidence. The extant data was generated through a survey instrument drawing on the work of Carol Dweck (2000; 2013). As part of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) funded study, further qualitative data were generated. In total, 772 students were surveyed, 41 students took part in either focus groups or in-depth interviews and 19 university lecturers participated in focus groups or were individually interviewed (refer to Appendix A and B for demographic details).

The aim was to:

- explore and identify the different meanings attached to 'capability' in particular contexts (such as subject or course);
- consider the ways these meanings shape the experiences, practices and sense of belonging of students from non-traditional backgrounds; and
- help improve the educational opportunities and completion rates for university students from non-traditional (non-ATAR) and other educationally disadvantaged backgrounds through contributing a more nuanced understanding of capability.

Key findings and themes

Key findings from the survey:

- Students with a higher ATAR were more confident about their capability and less likely to question their intelligence.
- Approximately one-third of students surveyed in the last weeks of their first year of study did not feel confident about their academic ability.
- Enabling program students aged 20 years and older tended to have greater levels of confidence about their intellectual ability.
- Males were more likely to feel confident about their intelligence and capability than females.
- Mature age learners and students from non-traditional study pathways were more likely to have a strong growth view of their capability.

Key themes emerging from the qualitative analysis:

- Capability is deeply entwined with identity formations that are produced within, across and between different social contexts and spaces.
- Constructions of capability are contested and not fixed and stable but are tied to feelings of belonging and fitting in.
- Students are often aware of the ways that deficit discourses influence perceptions and judgments about capability.
- Teachers' expectations about students' dispositions to learning, time management and willingness to work hard can lead to the misrecognition of a student as lacking capability.
- Family influences are important in shaping confidence and feelings of capability but do not necessarily determine educational aspirations, expectations and success.
- Fear, shame and anxiety create feelings of lack of capability and not belonging for many students.
- Students feel most confident in an inclusive pedagogical environment in which trust is established and belonging is fostered.
- Discourses that blame individuals tend to exacerbate feelings of incapability in both teachers and students.
- Pressure on teachers to meet expectations of excellence and equity was described as stressful and highly challenging within existing structures.
- Academic confidence was seen to have a significant impact on students' academic success.
- Teaching staff perceived competing discourses of collaboration and competition as negatively affecting student capability.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings and themes, the project recommends:

- Raising awareness across the Higher Education sector about the relationship between deficit discourses, assumptions and judgments about capability and students' level of confidence is vital for widening participation in higher education.
- It is important that universities pay closer attention to the ways that assumptions and judgments about capability might unwittingly reproduce inequalities in student access, participation and success.
- University lecturers must be appropriately supported by their institutions to develop pedagogical practices that create an environment of trust, belonging and inclusion.
- There needs to be greater emphasis on building confidence and a sense of capability for school-aged students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds.
- Schools and universities must proactively challenge stereotypes about the 'types' of students who are capable of university study.
- Opportunities, resources and support that enable capability, build confidence and foster belonging must be made available to students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds to build greater equity in higher education.
- Attention needs to be shifted away from blaming individual teachers and students to generating educational structures, cultures and practices that are underpinned by strong principles of equity and inclusion for both staff and students.

¹Throughout this report we refer to 'teacher(s)' rather than 'lecturer(s)' or 'academic(s)', although sometimes these descriptors are used interchangeably. We do this intentionally, to foreground teaching, although we are aware that individuals who teach in higher education might not describe their role primarily as a 'teacher'.

‘Capability’ carries multiple and contested meanings and there has been little attention afforded to studying the problematic way that judgments of capability are made.

Introduction



In 2011, as part of a comprehensive survey of 3091 commencing students' overall expectations of university conducted at three South Australian universities, Scutter et al. found that '...only 35% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I am a capable student and expect to do well at university*' (p. 11).

This finding, which surfaced as part of a more general commencing students study, suggests that a sense of capability is not experienced by the majority of students who commence study in higher education. The finding does not merely point to a minor transition issue or a relative lack of familiarity that new students have with the university environment; instead, it indicates that much more could be done to recognise views of capability as a fundamental issue in Australian higher education.

It is important to consider this in relation to recent research that reveals how access to higher education is profoundly tied to processes of (mis)recognition about capability (Burke 2012; Southgate & Bennett 2014). This research shows that the meanings and discourses associated with 'capability' are rarely made explicit, despite the significant implications for learning and success for students, as well as for important considerations of equity and inclusion in the field. This is a significant issue and one that matters for all stakeholders.

As we will show in the following pages, 'capability' carries multiple and contested meanings and there has been little attention afforded to studying the problematic way that judgments of capability are made – mostly unwittingly. This is unfortunate given that these judgments often perpetuate social and cultural inequalities in HE. For example, research by Burke and McManus (2009) in the UK context has shown that the recognition of 'potential' and 'ability' – or conversely being misrecognised as 'lacking potential or ability' – often depends on the ways that those with the institutional authority to make such judgments construct 'capability' in particular disciplinary and institutional contexts.

Leathwood (2008) argues that the meanings that circulate around capability mark out differences between types of students (often classified by equity group), different subjects of study (in particular those designated as vocational and academic) and differentiated HE institutions (often classified by mission group). This contributes to the legitimisation of inequality in patterns of HE access and participation and impacts on students' self-perceptions of capability and worth (Leathwood 2008). This body of work points to the need to develop richer and more nuanced analyses of how 'capability' is constructed in order to develop more sophisticated strategies to support equity in higher education.

This report outlines a 2014 – 2015 study of discourses about capability (simply put, discourses are ways of thinking, doing and communicating) in a regional Australian university. It draws on a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods and presents a sociological approach to the interrogation of these discourses. It utilises extant data sources, including: a 2014 pilot study of surveys of 772 students; 6 focus groups with a sample of 14 students; and 12 individual interviews with staff. The project was multi-phased, with preliminary findings generated by a 2014 pilot study, followed by a deepening of the approach to include more qualitative data in 2015. In 2015, 27 more students and 7 more staff participated, with 41 students and 19 staff participating during 2014 and 2015 in total. Demographic details about the interview and focus group participants (students and staff) are attached in the appendix to this report.

In Australian higher education, the 'traditional' pathway to university is based on school performance as measured through the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) and non-traditional pathways include enabling (access) programs, direct entry applications (such as specific entry exams) and TAFE programs (further education). Students and staff across five faculties and two large university enabling (or pathways/access) programs were asked to complete a survey including a demographic questionnaire and Dweck's (2000) self-theory and confidence measures, which are described in the following section about project methodology. Although this method has been used in ways that tend to individualise – rather than contextualise – experiences of learning, we used the survey instruments to gain a broad base of information about students' views in order to explore what they reveal about the broader learning context.



Methodology



In this section, we will describe the methodological framework, including the theoretical perspectives drawn on to explore questions of capability in student equity in higher education. We will also outline the methods used and the research aims and questions.

Aims and questions

This project draws on a sociological framework to enhance insights and understandings about views of capability in higher education. Building on work from Burke and McManus (2009) and Southgate and Bennett (2014), the qualitative aspects of the project examined capability discourses and their effects, with particular attention paid to the symbolic and emotional level of identity-formation, experience and confidence.

The aim was to interrogate constructions of deficit (that students from non-traditional backgrounds lack capability or confidence) while developing a detailed understanding of the ways that discourses of capability might shape feelings of self-confidence and belonging in the process of becoming a university student. The qualitative analysis was framed by Fraser's concept of recognition (Fraser 1997; Fraser & Honneth 2003) to examine the ways that inequalities might not always operate at the explicit level, but are often subtle, symbolic and insidious, and formed through lived and embodied experiences of misrecognition (McNay 2008). The research explored two main questions: What are the different meanings of capability at play in higher education? and, In what ways do these shape, constrain and/or enable equity in higher education? In relation to these overarching questions, further research sub-questions included:

- What does being capable of study at university involve and mean to students, academic staff and equity practitioners? Are students differently constructed in relation to capability discourses? If so, in what ways and with what possible effects?
- How might academic staff and equity practitioners address the challenges posed by capability discourses to develop equitable and inclusive practices?

Theoretical framework

Higher education policy is explicitly committed to widening participation to those equity groups who are historically under-represented in higher education. The formal equity groups as defined in the Martin Review (Martin 1994) are:

- People who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- People who are from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds
- People with a disability
- People from non-English-speaking backgrounds
- People from regional and remote areas
- Women in non-traditional discipline areas

However, research has pointed out that classifications of equity groupings are problematic and complex, as social identities and groups are not homogenous. Individuals do not always identify with the institutional classifications that might be imposed on them (Burke 2012; Munro 2011; Pearce, Down, & Moore 2008; Ryan 2005). It is important to recognise that these equity groupings represent intersecting social differences and identities. Research, policy and practice must acknowledge that social and cultural inequalities are historically entrenched and shape who has access to and who participates in HE. Public resources allocated for equity must be fairly and equitably redistributed to those who have been under-represented in HE.

This research is interested in the nuances in which identities are formed around constructions of 'capability' and our starting point is that these constructions are entwined with cultural processes of 'recognition' about who might be seen, and see themselves, as 'capable' of participating in higher education. These questions draw attention to the need to develop knowledge and understanding of student equity that digs beneath equity groupings to the processes by which certain groups and individuals are seen to have the 'right' to higher education, or not.

Policy discourses

Meritocratic views frame questions of equity in higher education, including assumptions about who is capable of being a university student (Karabel 2005). Policy discourses about equity and widening participation are profoundly embedded in meritocratic notions that assume 'capability' is something that can be identified regardless of social background and disadvantage. For example, recently in a speech made at the Times Higher Education World Academic Summit, Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham states that:

We need to ensure that good quality higher education is accessible to all students *who have the ability and well informed motivations* to benefit from it (Birmingham 2015, p. 9, emphasis added).

This statement is mirrored in many national contexts across the globe and suggests an entrenched view that equity in higher education is about ensuring that all individuals with 'ability', and other forms of 'capability' (such as 'well-informed motivations'), have access to higher education (Smit 2012; Bates 2006; Otto & Ziegler 2006; Popkewitz & Lindblad 2000). What is absent and seems to be overlooked are the ways that 'capability' is understood and how this might be recognised in particular social, cultural, national, institutional and disciplinary contexts. Such statements suggest that 'capability' (and connected concepts of 'potential' and 'ability') is a static and decontextualised attribute that can be straightforwardly and fairly assessed in individuals detached from their social and cultural locations and histories. It is imperative then to question the assumptions behind such policy and public statements, as much is at stake here in terms of who is seen as capable of benefiting from higher education. Thus the construction of capability is deeply connected to processes of educational exclusion. We draw on the concepts of 'recognition' and 'misrecognition' to bring to light the complexities around the process of being identified as 'capable' and how this is tied to the intersections of social differences and inequalities connected to the equity groupings established in policy.

Recognition and misrecognition

Nancy Fraser's framework of social justice informs our understanding of the complexities of student equity in higher education in relation to 'capability' and 'belonging' (Fraser 1997). Fraser argues that social justice requires attention to both 'redistribution' and 'recognition'. For this project, due to the focus on deconstructing the discourses of 'capability', we will focus mainly on recognition, whilst also understanding that questions of redistribution are imperative to processes of recognition and to equity in higher education. We agree with Fraser that an overemphasis on recognition leads unhelpfully to ignoring the important dimension of social justice on redistribution. The data generated from this project show that holding both redistribution and recognition together is crucial for developing student equity in higher education. Following Fraser (2003), it is important to shift attention away from deficit discourses to attention on transforming educational cultures, practices and structures which are implicated in reproducing exclusions and inequalities at cultural, symbolic and structural levels. Fraser explains:

When misrecognition is identified with internal distortions in the structure of the self-conscious of the oppressed, it is but a short step to blaming the victim (...) Misrecognition is a matter of externally manifest and publicly verifiable impediments to some people's standing as full members of society. To redress it, means to overcome subordination. *This in turn means changing institutions and social practices* (Fraser 2003, p. 31, emphasis added).

Such a framework illuminates that equitable constructions of 'capability' rely on both distributive and recognition processes. In other words, 'capability' depends on having the means and resources to develop 'capability' in ways that a person might be recognised as 'capable' within particular disciplinary contexts. Having access to certain material and economic resources such as a computer, internet, transportation and books are important in developing the forms of 'capability' that might be recognised by university lecturers. Being 'misrecognised' as 'incapable' might be exacerbated by a person's social location and background; for example living in a remote area might make it far more difficult to be recognised as capable when access to Wi-Fi or transportation into university is severely limited.

Capability however is more complex than having access to financial and material resources. Nancy Fraser sheds light on the ways that misrecognition undermines parity of participation within institutions such as higher education. What is important about the insights her work brings is the ways that misrecognition is about the institutional values and judgments that are imposed on the misrecognised person in ways that exclude her/him from parity of participation.

However, we agree with McNay that although such perspectives of recognition and misrecognition are important, Fraser's theoretical framework is based in an objectivist view that might not easily capture the emotional, subjective and lived experiences of misrecognition, that are felt as forms of symbolic violence and injury on the self (McNay 2008, p. 150). This often leads to feelings of shame and fear (Ahmed 2004). Institutional fields such as schools and higher education are sites in which subjectivity is formed and personhood is constituted. Recognition is formed through the dual processes of mastery and submission of the discourses at play within a particular field (such as higher education) (Davies 2006). The discourse of 'capability', which is multiple and contested, itself formed through the social practices and values at play within a subject field, constitutes the student in particular ways through the politics of (mis) recognition. The concept of 'performativity' (Butler 1993) sheds light on the ways that subjectivity is formed not through who we are but through what we do; through social practices. To be seen as 'capable', the student must act in certain ways. For example, being recognised as 'academically capable' depends on performing 'academic capability' through body language, literacy and communication practices, analytical and critical practices (which might differ across and within disciplines), demonstrating certain skills in particular ways (such as time management and organisation skills) and so forth. Each of these aspects of capability are shifting discursive practices; research shows that there are a range of ways of understanding these even within a single unit such as an academic department or program of study (Lizzio & Wilson 2004; Davies, Bentley, & Holland 2004).

Sensibilities of belonging are formed in relation to constructions of capability; to belong in a field such as higher education, the student must be recognised as having the capability to belong (Burke & McManus 2009). This is important not only at the points of pre-access and entry, but is also an ongoing process of mastering and submitting to the discourses of capability within the context of the subject studied. For example, learning how to write, or read, or produce an argument might be different in Philosophy, Mathematics or History. The student will form a sense of belonging, or not, in relation to the particular academic and social practices that enable recognition as a 'capable' Philosophy, Maths or History student. The discourses and practices within these fields however are not static or fixed, which makes it more complicated for students to be recognised (and recognise themselves) as capable within these fields.

Power

In considering questions of student equity in relation to misrecognition, power is a central theme of this project. Drawing on Foucault (1982; 1984), power is not only always tied to knowledge but also produced through the discourses that shape the ways in which we know. Power is not *something* to be given to those who don't have it; power is exercised, disciplinary, relational, productive and tied to the formation of the person. Power circulates everywhere, is unpredictable, shifting, generative and regulatory. This conceptualisation (of power) destabilises binary notions of power, which often shape our imaginaries around widening participation and sometimes reproduce categorisations that arguably lock us into reproductive discourses. Understanding power as relational, productive and simultaneously regulatory and constraining is useful for thinking through the complexities of inequalities in sites of education and struggles for access to meaning-making and becoming a 'capable' student.

Power produces knowledge. Power and knowledge directly imply one another. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault 1980, p. 93).

Foucault offers a framework for conceptualising power at both the level of the person and the social, which is important for deconstructing discourses of capability and their effects at the micro-level of student/ teacher experience but also at the macro level of educational policies and practices. In Foucauldian terms, power is exercised within institutional spaces through technologies of regulation, discipline and control (such as assessing, ranking and grading for example). Power and knowledge are always connected through discourse; the ways in which meaning is given to the social world and to the self. Discourse is 'a structuring of meaning making whose major characteristic is its disciplinary and hence regulatory power' (Edwards 2008, p. 22). Discourse defines what can be included and is constitutive of knowledge, rather than a reflection of a pre-existing 'truth'. Discourse (power/knowledge) produces 'regimes of truth', which profoundly shapes the meanings and understandings we give to concepts such as 'capability', 'belonging' and 'equity'. Indeed, these discourses themselves have exclusionary practices as part of their effects (Nicoll & Feje 2008, p. 5). 'All knowledge, once co-implicated with action, has real effects, and in that sense becomes true, or more accurately counts as true' (Edwards 2008, p. 23).

Sensibilities of belonging are formed in relation to constructions of capability; to belong in a field such as higher education, the student must be recognised as having the capability to belong.

Through what Foucault names 'dividing practices', binary divisions are reproduced. The concept of dividing practices is useful in understanding the ways different students in higher education are constructed through discursive binaries, which impose normalising judgments, such as traditional/non-traditional, worthy/unworthy, academically capable/academically weak (Williams 1997).

Importantly, Foucault is concerned with the ways that power is positive and productive, rather than repressive and negative. For example, power produces 'capable' subjects. However, and simultaneously, power differentiates individuals in relation to an average, measures the subject in quantitative terms and places the subject in a hierarchy of levels and values. Disciplinary power compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes and normalises (Rabinow, 1984).

We draw on these concepts of misrecognition and power to illuminate the complex processes in which a student might be recognised, or not, as having 'capability' and 'belonging' in higher education. Drawing on a mixed methods approach, the project also sought to provide broader contextualisation of the qualitative analysis through a statistical analysis of survey data.

Methods

We administered two survey instruments that have been used to explore students' views about their intelligence and their confidence in their intellectual and academic ability in various settings. The first survey instrument drew on Dweck's (2000; 2013) work on implicit (or self) theories of intelligence and confidence to investigate student beliefs about whether their ability to undertake study at university is fixed (innately determined) or developmental (developed in context and according to opportunity). Dweck has influenced a broad body of academic work that explores the impact of beliefs on persistence, self-efficacy and performance. However, there are no published studies that provide a comprehensive account of the views of a wide range of students, focusing specifically on the experiences of exclusion that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience in the Australian higher education context. The study is also novel in its approach to interrogating both student and staff views on academic capability and key student performatives in the field.

Dweck's survey instrument has been utilised for recent studies about the learning of disabled students in schools in the US (Gutshall 2013) and university students in Hong Kong (Chen & Wong 2014), but not to explore the current experiences of equity groups and other students in the Australian higher education context. The survey instrument has high internal consistency (alpha ranging from .94–.98) and high test–retest reliability ($r = .80$, $N = 62$) (Gutshall 2013, p. 1076).

Dweck's 'confidence in one's intelligence' measure was also used to measure students' confidence. Dweck's self theories and confidence measures have been combined in previous studies (Henderson & Dweck 1990; Hong et al. 1998; see also Hong, Chiu, & Dweck 1995) and Dweck explains that 'the confidence measures are typically used to show that entity and incremental theorists do not differ in how confident they are about their own attributes or how positive or optimistic they are about others' attributes (before they encounter personal setbacks or before they observe other people's behavior)' (Dweck 2013, p. 181). The survey components are described below.

All statistical analyses were programmed using SASv 9.4 (SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina, USA). The Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage was measured using quintiles. Quintile 1 represents the most disadvantaged postcodes and quintile 5 represents the least disadvantaged postcodes. This sample of students were evenly spread across quintiles 2, 3, and 4 with only 10% of the students belonging to the most disadvantaged postcode, quintile 1.

Scores were calculated from the Likert-scale responses to a question regarding intelligence. Growth mindset questions included the following:

| | |
|-----|--|
| 1.3 | No matter who you are, you can significantly change your intelligence level |
| 1.5 | You can always substantially change how intelligent you are |
| 1.7 | No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always change it quite a bit |
| 1.8 | You can change even your basic intelligence level considerably |

Scores for each question were given where *strongly agree* responses were worth 3 points, *agree* was worth 2 points, *mostly agree* was worth 1.75, *mostly disagree* was worth 1.25 points, *disagree* was worth 1 point and *strongly disagree* was worth 0 points. Fixed mindset questions included the following:

| | |
|-----|---|
| 1.1 | You have a certain amount of intelligence and you can't really do much to change it |
| 1.2 | Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much |
| 1.4 | To be honest, you can't really change how intelligent you are |
| 1.6 | You can learn new things but you can't really change your basic intelligence |

Strongly agree was worth 0 points, *agree* was worth 1 point, *mostly agree* was worth 1.25 points, *mostly disagree* was worth 1.75 points, *disagree* was worth 2 points and *strongly disagree* was worth 3 points. The scores were then categorised as follows:

- < 10: strong fixed mindset
- ≥ 10 and < 15: fixed mindset with some growth ideas
- ≥ 15 and ≤ 20: growth mindset with some fixed ideas
- ≥ 20: strong growth mindset

Dweck's 'confidence in one's intelligence' measure was also adapted from the school to the university setting (Dweck 2013, p. 182):

1. Put a cross in the box next to the sentence that is most true for you:
 - I usually think I'm intelligent.
 - I wonder if I'm intelligent.
 - » How true is the statement you chose above?
 - Very true for me
 - True for me
 - Sort of true for me

2. Put a cross in the box next to the sentence that is most true for you:
 - When I get new work, I'm sure I will be able to learn it.
 - When I get new work, I often think if I'll be able to learn it.
 - » How true is the statement you chose above?
 - Very true for me
 - True for me
 - Sort of true for me

3. Put a cross in the box next to the sentence that is most true for you:
 - I'm not very confident about my intellectual ability.
 - I feel pretty confident about my intellectual ability.
 - » How true is the statement you chose above?
 - Very true for me
 - True for me
 - Sort of true for me

After Ethics Committee approval and permission was gained from Head of Schools, surveys were administered over a three week period during the final weeks of the last semester of 2014 in first year lecture theatres and course websites. The mode of distribution of surveys (in-class or online) was dependent on timetabling issues and the lecturers' preference.

Forty-one students and 19 teaching staff participated in either focus groups or in-depth one-to-one interviews during the two-stage (2014–2015) qualitative research process. Groups of 2–3 students participated in six focus groups (total 14) in 2014 and an additional 27 students were interviewed in 2015. The sample of 41 students included 32 first year degree students and 9 enabling or access program students (including students from Law, Science, Business, Mathematics, Engineering, Nursing, Education and Social Science). Of the 32 first year students, 15 of the students transitioned to university by direct entry from school, 8 students had entered after a gap year or had transferred into their current degree from a prior degree and 10 students entered via alternative pathways such as a university enabling program or TAFE or as an international student (2). Students who entered higher education through non-traditional pathways made up 46% of the sample (19 out of 41).

The sample of 19 teaching staff included 12 in-depth one-to-one interviews in 2014 and 2 focus groups (total 5 staff) and an additional 2 interviews conducted in 2015. The 19 teaching staff consisted of 10 degree program staff across multiple disciplinary areas (Mathematics, Politics and International Relations, Law, Business, Engineering and Computer Science, Education, Nursing and Midwifery) and 9 teaching staff from the two enabling programs in a variety of subject areas (Mathematics, History, Linguistics, Chemistry, Philosophy, Academic Literacies). Student and staff representation from diverse disciplinary programs provided rich, varied data allowing worthwhile comparative analysis both within and between different academic programs.

In the early stages of the 2015 project, regular team meetings were held to establish key concepts and themes that had emerged from the 2014 interview and focus group transcripts. These collaborative sessions saw the development of nodes and sub-nodes that were further enhanced as the data from the third stage focus groups and interviews were analysed. A researcher on the team entered the data into NVivo and transcripts were coded to the nodes. Development and refinement of nodes continued throughout the project.

Students with a higher ATAR were less likely to wonder about their intelligence. The strongest correlation was between ATAR band and confidence. The higher the ATAR, the higher the confidence reported.

Survey results

There were 772 responses to the survey and the average age of the respondents was 24. The majority of respondents were female (62%), were Australian citizens (97%), did not identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or from Non-English speaking backgrounds (91%), were full-time students (77%) and self-identified as coming from middle class backgrounds (40%). Undergraduate and enabling programs were equally weighted: half were enrolled in degree programs and the other half in an enabling program. Of the enabling program students, approximately 50% of the students were from the program for mature age students (over 20 years) and the other 50% were from the program for younger students (18–20 years). Of the first year degree students, 50% did not enter through a school qualification.

Out of this sample of 772 students, we found evidence of an association between student views about their own intellectual ability and gender, with more males (72%) reporting that they feel confident about their intellectual ability than females (63%).

We also found that a greater proportion of traditional school pathways students (average age 19.95, $sd=3.5$) were 'pretty confident about their intellectual ability', compared to non-traditional pathways students (whose average age was 25.2, $sd=9.1$). Thirty-five per cent of non-traditional pathway students reported that they were 'not very confident about their intellectual ability' and 37% of this group 'wondered if they were intelligent'. Twenty-eight per cent of traditional pathways students said they were 'not very confident about their intellectual ability' and 31% of this group wondered if they were intelligent. That approximately one-third of students (over for non-traditional pathways and under for school leavers) surveyed in the last weeks of their first year of study did not feel confident about their academic ability is concerning. The time limitations of the study meant that we could not include commencing students who may have recorded much higher levels of concern about their capability in the university setting as the vast majority of attrition occurs in this commencing cohort.

Students with a higher ATAR were less likely to wonder about their intelligence. The strongest correlation was between ATAR band and confidence. The higher the ATAR, the higher the confidence reported ($p<0.0001$). Students who reported a higher household income were also significantly less likely to wonder about their intelligence ($p=.005$). In addition, male students and older enabling program students (aged 20 years and older) were more likely to have more confidence about their intellectual ability.

A higher percentage of the students with a growth mindset reported higher income brackets, and a higher proportion of the strong growth mindset scores were from females (63%) compared to males (37%). Overall, there was a significant difference between non-traditional pathways students, compared to traditional pathways students in mindset scores. More students from non-traditional pathways backgrounds had a strong growth mindset compared to students from a traditional background ($p<0.0130$).

A larger proportion of students with a strong growth view of their capability were mature age learners (over 20 years of age) and from non-traditional study pathways. This suggests that they had reflected to some degree on learning within different contexts over time. When asked about their perception of their ability to learn new work, a greater proportion (71%) of non-traditional students commented that they were able to learn new work, as well as recording a greater than 75% participation rate (80%) than the traditional pathway students (6%). In addition, older students and students with a higher household income were less likely to believe that they are unable to learn new work.

There was a significant difference between mode of attendance and whether students were from school or non-traditional pathways programs, including enabling programs, direct entry application (such as specific entry exams) and TAFE (further education) ($p<0.0001$). Ninety-six per cent of the traditional pathways students were full-time students compared to 71% of non-traditional pathways students. Nearly one-third of the non-traditional pathways students were enrolled part-time.

The implications of project findings will be discussed in detail in the following sections of the report, which are structured according to themes that emerged from the study.

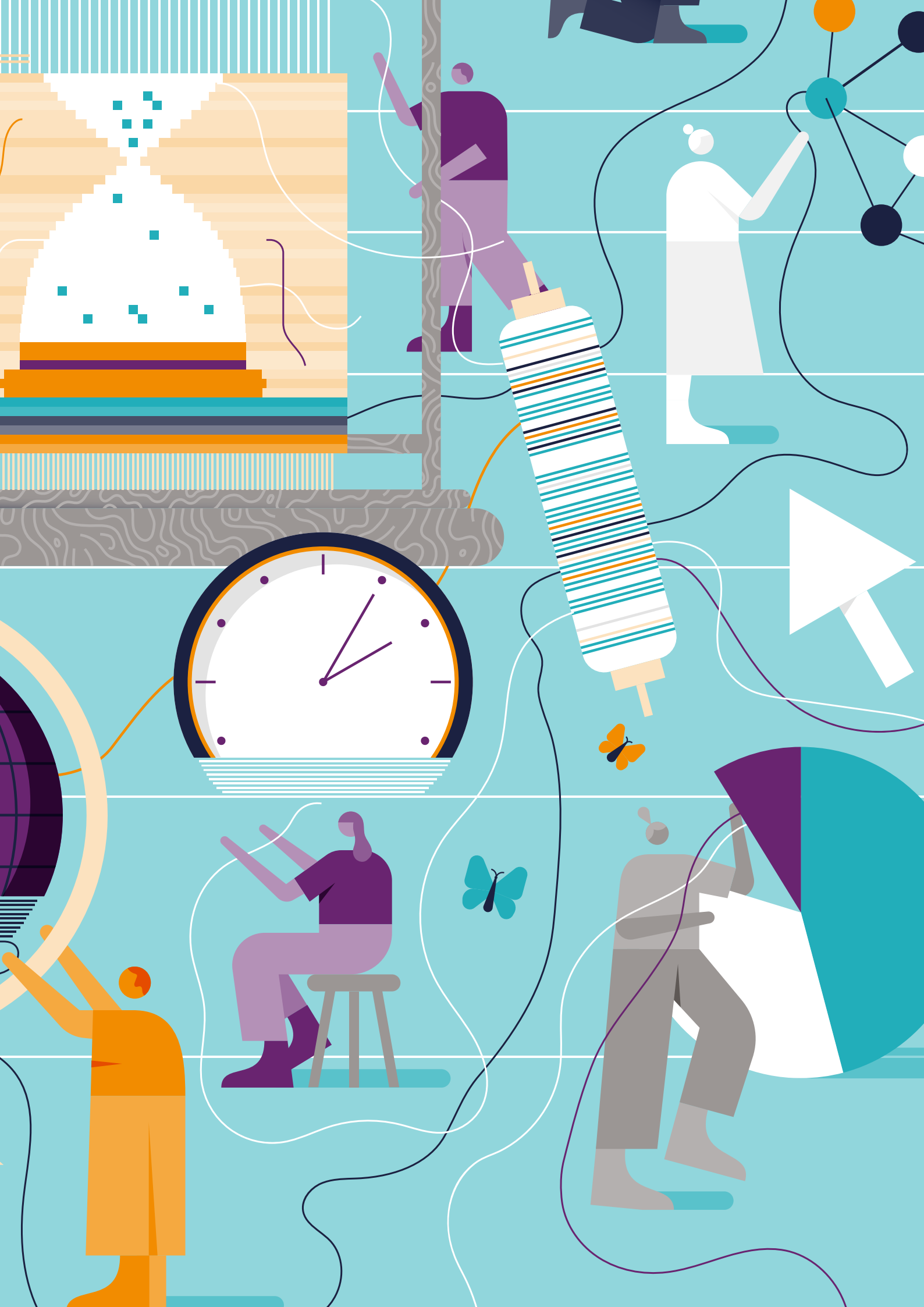
Interviews and focus groups

From student focus groups and interviews we found that students' views of capability as dynamic and contextual often conflict with their ongoing and sustained conception of, and confidence in, their own individual capability—their sense of self and of belonging in HE. We found that students describe 'capability' in an overall sense as socially constructed, but they also explain how they often feel 'anxious' about their ability to learn new work. Students expressed self-doubt, especially during the lead up to assignments and exams. They talked about questioning whether they belonged at university, particularly during their first year, regardless of their performance.

Some students reported that despite achieving high marks, they still felt unsure about whether they were able to continue and sustain adequate performance – they worried about not performing well and about how they compared with others. These anxieties dominated discussions and revealing about how constructions of capability are deeply connected to sensibilities of belonging in higher education.

Students also highlighted the difficulties with transitioning into the university's 'independent learning' approach, and how this reinforced their concerns about personal in/ability. They said that they often felt unsure about where they stood in relation to others. Students also provided detailed accounts of the ways in which their 'sense' of capability is connected to their familiarity with/in institutional contexts, and how dis/connected knowledge is significant in shaping feelings of individual incompetence. Staff teaching enabling and first year courses also revealed competing discourses about student capability: they reported a dynamic theory on the one hand, which then conflicted with the expression of other decontextualised, essentialist notions on the other. Data from focus group discussions and interviews with academic staff have also revealed a strong discourse about lack of capability, which, it is claimed, has developed as a result of recent changes in the school system. Some staff have discussed how they believe schooling has changed students' capabilities, and because prerequisites that are based on high school courses are not required in degrees, this disadvantages students commencing undergraduate study.

The essential attributes, which are described as already needing to be formed before university, are described as: 'having a basic level of intelligence', 'the right attitude', 'confidence', 'resilience', 'interest', 'engagement', the ability to 'strategise' and to have learnt essential skills and knowledge at school. This study therefore uncovers the subtle, yet powerful role of what is un/intelligible in constituting what matters (Butler 2000) in HE, and by bringing this politics to the fore, we seek to better understand the 'politics of access and participation... of who is seen as having the right to higher education' (Burke 2012, p. 2).



Hegemonic constructions of capability



Key points:

An aesthetic that emphasises a 'love of learning' can reinforce normative hierarchies that privilege middle class ways of being and knowing.

Students are often aware of the ways that deficit discourses influence perceptions and judgments about capability.

Teachers' expectations about students' dispositions to learning, time management and willingness to work hard can lead to exclusive cultures and practices in HE.

This section outlines the hegemonic discourses operating to define and reinforce 'capability'. Hegemonic discourses are ways of defining, thinking, doing and recognising that are taken-for-granted and which operate to (re)construct dominant forms of knowledge and power in the everyday. Hegemonic (re)constructions involve deep-seated assumptions and values that serve to exclude. Foucauldian discourse analysis is a powerful way of interrogating dominant discourses and of uncovering where what we take for granted (about ourselves and others) is limiting and disempowering (Bennett 2012). Providing an important outline of the construction of subjects that Foucault introduces in his archaeologies of power/knowledge, Butler (1997) explains that 'power not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being. As a condition, power precedes the subject' (p. 13). In this sense, limited and limiting constructions of capability that are reproduced through education and classroom practices are not merely the result of individual presumptions, acts and relations, but are a result of wider socio-historical power relations (with the people involved often unaware of the influence of these wider dynamics).

Importantly, Foucault left us with the critical point that 'where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault 1990, p. 95). This account of power provides us with the awareness that because we are engaged in the complex processes of (re)constructing power in the everyday dynamics we engage in, we can therefore deconstruct and challenge them. By uncovering limiting and exclusionary dynamics, we can work to challenge and transform them. We can and do exercise power.

Socio-cultural constructions of capability

As described in the interviews and focus groups, being 'capable' of studying and succeeding at university is considered by teaching staff as involving some already cultivated sets of values and attitudes to learning. For example, in an interview, Kevin explained modern society as promoting urgency at the expense of taking one's time to enjoy learning, an approach, it was suggested, that learning should return to:

I think society spoon feeds. Everything is done for us. When people are now going on diets they can get the food delivered rather than saying, what is healthy food, I'll make it myself... there's an urgency to rush, to have it done at the immediate rather than to take time and enjoy the activity of developing skills... I think that comes to be the same with education. We need to start to maybe get back the value that learning is actually fun... So there's an element of the aesthetics of education and the aesthetics of learning that we have lost in our modern consumer society where everything has to have a dollar sign attached to it.

Another staff member commented that it is important 'the student wants to learn. Wants to improve. Doesn't think they have the answers...' An *already* formed Socratic approach to learning (as involving a love of lifelong learning) was described as important. Bourdieu's works on habitus and cultural capital are illuminating here. For example, Bourdieu described the (display of) love of art as an important part of the affective aspects of cultural capital that involve a sense of familiarity and confidence gained from one's habitus (Reay et al. 2001; McManus 2006). In *The Love of Art* (1991), Bourdieu wrote about the appreciation and value that middle class children learn from their families and social networks. Similarly, the middle class love of learning – and dedication to it – is an important part of one's life (not merely one's work).

Similarly, the display of a love of learning (and the performative aspect is important to highlight as it is 'read' and recognised by teachers) is socioculturally cultivated. According to middle class traditions, one does not (only) study at university to become a professional, one immerses oneself in learning for personal and aesthetic reasons (to further cultivate good taste, pursue 'the good life' and personal development/improvement and to contribute to utilitarian 'greater good').

Teaching staff talked indirectly about how they worked to foster this aesthetic. However, without reflection, this approach can work to reinforce normative hierarchies that privilege middle class ways of being and knowing and devalue working class ones (Reay 2001; Slack 2003; Southgate & Bennett 2014). This can serve to conjure up notions of the uneducated whose lives are 'unexamined' and 'ignorant' (Ball et al. 2002; Burke 2012; Southgate & Bennett 2014). However, it is not the particular inadvertent effects of this ethics of lifelong learning, in and of itself, that is important to this project about capability, it is the relative lack of awareness about assumptions that operate at the front-and-centre of what it is to be considered capable at university.

Students appeared to be more cognisant of the suggestion of deficit than staff. Talking about dominant discourses at university, school, the media and society generally, students picked up on implied lack that they identified in both general institutional and academic discourse. Frances described in an interview how assumptions about 'SES' and 'ethnicity' influence perceptions of capability:

Yeah students who looked a little bit low SES, they didn't look like they were going to achieve. I don't know if they did or didn't. But just that was – yeah, and a lot of the ethnic students, depending on what ethnicity, that also was a major factor in what people thought in terms of whether they were going to achieve or do really well.

Raymond connected perceptions of socio-economic background with broader views of capability that serve to exclude:

Well, even – look, not even specifically relating that you should come to universities but when they conduct media reports on *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair* and they go into a low socio economic environment and there's Housing Commission and they're saying – oh, they're painting with the broad brush. All these people have a very high chance of being drug dealers and all these people have a very high chance of being dole bludgers, then I think that as a side-effect of that, whether intentional or not, makes people watching think – oh well, they're not going to achieve anything. Well in reality that's not true and the reality is not there.

Students talked about the types (or fashion) of people thought to attend university. For example, in an interview, Eugene explained:

From the media and everything I hear online and things like that, it sort of seems like most of the students at uni are sort of the hipster, sort of quite dreamy, all the sort of earth-lovers and very human rightsy sort of people... And after coming I sort of have witnessed that there is a number of the very – there are a lot of open-minded people at university. There's a lot of diversity as well, which is good to see.

Images of the 'type' of person that goes to university were described as reinforced in the media (for example, in contemporary television shows like *The Big Bang Theory*). The social 'culture' of the university as 'hipster' was described as being projected through social media such as Facebook and people new to the environment got an impression of it as a particular stylisation that they may or may not fit, depending on a number of factors, including background and age. Other images identified were of the 'nerd'. Shirley said:

Definitely, yeah. I feel like people think that you have to be Einstein to go to uni and you have to be really smart. I guess to some extent you have to have some sort of academic capability but you also have to have an interest and I guess if you have the interest, there are other pathways of getting in if you don't quite have the marks... But I definitely think that there is a stereotype of people that go to uni... I guess it was mainly through school, mainly conversations that you have with your friends or people that necessarily aren't your friends... like you're a nerd if you go to uni and even I guess on Facebook probably that's a big thing as well, just pictures and things that you see on Facebook that kind of depict a particular type of person that goes to uni.

Conformity and recognition

Teaching staff discussions centred on students with the '... right attitude... who want[s] to learn, who recognise[s] what is needed...' as the characteristics of students who were capable of studying at university. Both students and staff discussed the necessary instrumental aspects of learning such as 'following instructions'.

Time management also emerged as a key theme. Difficulties with timetables were discussed by students who said that they struggled to manage their work and other commitments to suit the often inflexible and inconsistent assessment patterns that exist between courses. Although many of the teaching staff talked about being flexible and adaptable based on exceptional circumstances, overall, they expect students to conform to the demands of university; to put it first or consider whether it is possible given other demands – especially work and family. Prioritising study, its value and worth was seen as an important part of the attitudinal requirements and students who did not attend were described as ones who do not have the necessary attitude of engagement in learning that enable them to achieve and gain the most from their experience. Students who were too goal-, as opposed to journey-, oriented were seen as not engaging in what university study is intended to be – about the Socratic examined life.

Comments like students must be 'willing to work hard to do what is expected' conveyed the expectation that they would conform to the Socratic project of lifelong learning, and that they would be able to decipher that there are specific rules in order to then negotiate them. We explore definitions of capability and pedagogical expectations of teaching staff and students further in this report.

Specific cultural issues typically related to customs, norms and beliefs that differ to those represented about Australian society, such as the differing expectations of gender roles, were also described. Grace talked about students from a refugee background:

So they might have a large family that they are part of that in their culture it is part of their responsibility to look after the younger members of the family. They also might – many of them live in rental accommodation and there are often issues with stability there with their accommodation. Things like privacy in their home as well can be an issue for when they want to find study time. Often they report that their families don't understand the responsibility the students have to their study and that for them to succeed they need to sometimes give priority to their study over things that happen with the family. So in their cultures, family is first and everything else comes second and that has been reported to me as an issue for some of them being capable of achieving success... A lot of the students that I work with have been given the identity of refugee kid since they've been here. You know, 'You're that problematic refugee kid' and how do you move away from that? It's so powerful when you first arrive in a country and you don't know what is going on and then you get put in a box like that.

This was described as 'especially [difficult] for young women from those cultures. The expectation is that – I think study is not as important as having children, and raising a family is more important'.

Wisdom

Mature age students noted the greater sense of personal and social confidence they had developed from life experience influenced their perception of their ability to complete academic studies. In a student focus group, Marilyn described the discourse of wisdom as powerful for her: 'I think I'm smart. I think it's true the older you get the wiser you get... Life's too short, you know. Life's too short...' Janet reflected on commencing university:

I was confident then (when commencing studies) in my capability, because of my age and my life experience. I've travelled the world and met a lot of different people. I can talk on all levels and now I'm not afraid to ask questions. I don't care if people think I'm dumb. If I don't know or if I want to find out something, I'll do it, whereas I wasn't like that at 20. I was sort of a bit shy and wouldn't ask but now I do.

Overcoming a limiting perception of self with age was also described. Janet explained:

I've felt dumb all my life and I thought uni was out of my reach. Only smart people – not people like me – went to uni. Yeah... That probably came from my parents. I was always told I was dumb and useless when I was a kid. I remember when I was at school I was in Year 10 and I wanted to go onto Year 12 and I said to my mum – I said, 'I want to go onto Year 12' and she said, 'No'. She said, 'You're too dumb for that, go and get a job' and it always stuck in my mind... I mean, I was told I was dumb all my life so I thought I was dumb.

Work ethic

Other students discussed feeling capable, and how their families enabled this sense of self. Rhonda explained:

My mum... she brought us up with the saying... it's along the lines that you can do anything you put your mind to. I know, where there's a will there's a way. Yeah. So I grew up with that kind of training and although my parents weren't highly educated they were intelligent.

Indeed, we can see here that a strong work ethic associated with working class families serves as a powerful counter-hegemonic discourse that extends 'into educational contexts where the value of hard work is stressed in a multitude of ways' (Jackson & Nyström 2015, p. 393). However, if the opportunities and support that enable capability are not present in a field, hard work will have a limited effect.

Students' understanding of capability as social construct

The majority of students recognised the social constructedness of capability – that in order to be capable, one must receive some form of support and opportunity. Many students described their family as playing an important role in their expectations. In a student focus group, Joan explained:

I feel like people who maybe didn't live in [the region] and go to the schools we went to and have the families that we had, might not feel that way because maybe there's never been that expectation of them... So I feel like it's because of the expectations put on me.

Lillian described the importance of their school in encouraging students to feel they are capable of university study:

They (school) want pretty much everyone (to go to uni).

Family played a role in the expectation that the student would continue to higher education. Where individual family members had attended university, students felt an increased expectation that they would do the same. Some students described 'reverse' generational effects of role modelling. One student explained: 'No one in my family had been to university when I started and now my father has as well'. Because of exclusionary and limiting discourses about students from some backgrounds at some schools and from some teachers, inspiring others to go to university is being achieved by peers.

Teacher, Grace explained:

I've just recently actually had a student who is now in third year teaching. So she has done very well but she is also a bit of a model for other young refugee students from African backgrounds. She was reporting to me how she is quite frustrated with what gets told to these young students while they are in high school and lots of – apparently teachers are – a really terrible thing – teachers are telling these young kids that they are not capable.

Autobiographies and identity



Key themes:

Capability is deeply entwined with identity formations that are produced within, across and between different social contexts and spaces.

Family influences are an important factor in shaping aspirations and constructions of capability but do not determine educational aspirations, expectations and success.

Identities are complex and intersecting formations, not homogenous groupings.

It is important for university teachers to understand the ways that differences might disrupt aspirations to develop inclusive practices and cultures.

This section explores the autobiographical accounts of the participants and the interrelation between constructions of capability and formations of identity. It draws on sociological perspectives of identity as constituted through social discourses and relations. Identities are produced through the politics of recognition in which a person must simultaneously master *and* submit to the discourses that name and make that person in relation to particular discursive formations. To be recognised as 'academically capable', for example, the person must both master and submit to the discourses of 'capability'. This is complex not least because the discourses of 'capability' are highly contextual and are formed in relation to particular cultural and social practices (such as academic writing or critical analysis as two examples). Discourses of capability are produced across different social sites, such as family, school, university, work and so forth, and in relation to embodied persons who are also subject to the discourses of gender, social class, age, ethnicity, disability and other such structural differences.

Autobiographical accounts of family influences

The data reinforce work in the field of equity in higher education that parental and family influences are significant in shaping educational aspirations and self-belief. However, the data suggest that parental and family influence is one thread of a complex constellation of dynamic factors that shape educational aspiration and expectations. Different constructions of capability thread through the accounts of students in reflecting on the multiple experiences that shaped their pathways into university. Research has suggested that the expectations parents have for their children's educational futures is an important aspect of student achievement and educational attainment (Wilson & Wilson 1992; Patrikakou 1997; Trusty 1998; Strand 2010). Further, parents' academic expectations often influence their children's educational experiences and aspirations.

Wilson and Wilson (1992) report that when parents had a) higher education levels, b) stronger influence on their children's high school programs, and c) higher expectations for their children, adolescents also had higher educational expectations. Adolescents' educational expectations were more strongly associated with parents' education levels than with parents' expectations for adolescents or with parents' influence on high school programs' (from Trusty 1998, p. 261).

It has been argued that 'transgenerational family scripts' or 'inheritance codes' provide a means of relaying and passing down hot (informal) knowledge about education institutions (Ball et al. 2002, p. 57). As such, going to university may become the 'family plan', the expectation and thus a 'non-decision' (Ball et al. 2002, p. 57). Some of the data reinforce such insights, for example, the following discussion between the interviewer and interviewee:

Lilian: I knew from a very young age I think that I wanted to do university. Choosing the degree was a lot harder. Even towards the end of high school I was struggling to pick exactly what degree but I knew from well before that I wanted to do university to continue learning beyond high school.

Facilitator: Where do you think that came from, that wanting to learn or wanting to continue and do tertiary education?

Lilian: I think it was from my family in a large part. They're all fairly well-educated. They're also really valuing it. If I hadn't gone on to university, definitely several people would have asked me why.

Some of the mature students recounted how their family's perceived lack of aspiration influenced their earlier sense of capability to aspire to university level study. In the following extract, Janet talks in a focus group about this in terms of being from a family of 'simple people', insinuating a lack of academic capability and/or intelligence:

I think my parents, they didn't really have any – I think it came – my parents didn't expect much out of life. They were simple people. You just lived a simple life. They didn't have any dreams. They weren't really go-getters. They were simplistic and I think that's what they thought you did. You just get out and get a job and you just plod along. You don't aspire to anything. You don't try and be anything you're not. Yeah.

Drawing on their study of Australian adolescents, Marjoribanks (1986) claims that family influence on educational and occupational expectations is conditional on overall SES and the related educational level of parents. *'Perceptions of support* from parents were more likely to be influential for students of low to mid SES; *whilst educational expectations and school attitudes* had more influence for students of high SES' (Trusty 1998, p. 261, emphasis added). These insights are supported by some of the data from this project, in that parents' educational level is not a fixed determinant of students' educational expectations. Students from under-represented backgrounds were responsive to their parents' level of support and encouragement, regardless of their educational qualifications and background. In another focus group discussion, Jane said:

No one in my family had been to university when I started and now my father has as well. He's taken that up on top of his work since I started studying but I'm the first one to receive formal tertiary education. He's been post-accredited by his career with a lot of different things but that never – my parents fully always expected me to study at university regardless because they view it as a path to a proper career, something that you can care about and love, not a desk job or pushing paper as a cog in a mindless machine. It really achieves very little.

Smith argues that 'sibling transfers of knowledge about HE can initiate a narrative thread in which choosing to attend university begins to feel more "natural". This process has implications for thinking about strategies for improving student equity through redressing under-representation in HE among low-SES groups' (Smith 2011, p. 165). The data from this project suggests that siblings often do have an influence on students' sense of capability, for example, when interviewed, Frances said:

Yes, I have a sister, she's 11 months older than me, but we're in the same year. So I started Newstep when she went straight into an undergraduate science course. So I suppose that made some of my motivation as well. Because she was already in an undergrad course, and we always compete, and I really – yeah, so we really – and so I really just wanted to achieve just as well as she did.

However, family influences might be differently experienced across sibling groups, as this mature student, Heather, describes in a focus group discussion:

My parents would be – they're migrants. So they never went to high school. They only went to primary school from overseas. Coming here they wanted the best for their kids. So my brother, my sister, I suppose me not getting into uni at the end didn't really matter because two of them had gone to uni, had made it sort of thing.

So although parents might be aspirational for their children, this is not a determinant of young people's decisions to go to university, but is often related to how children and young people construct their sense of capability within their family and in comparison to their siblings. When asked if her siblings finished their degrees, Heather answered:

Yeah. They finished it and they got a doctorate and all that sort of stuff. So – yeah, but for them, they always had aspirations for us to do better. They worked at [unclear] all their lives so they're labourers but I don't know, I just felt dumb. Like just because there's two of them already going to uni maybe I was the – okay, well, two out of three's not bad. That's the feeling.

Similarly, the following student 'disappointed' her parents by choosing to study hospitality at TAFE rather than a 'prestigious' subject at university. In an interview Shirley was asked whether she thought she would have had the same level of ability if she had gone to university straight out of school and answered:

No. I never really knew what I wanted to do so I would have just been doing something just because that's what everyone else was doing and there was that pressure to just go to uni. I guess at first my family were a bit – because I did get good marks they were a bit disappointed that I had picked to do TAFE rather than uni and they wanted me to do something really prestigious and here I was at TAFE doing hospitality.

The student accounts suggest that family influences are significant in shaping constructions of capability and educational aspirations but do not determine this in any straightforward way.

Gender also plays out in the formation of aspirations and sense of capability. Research has shown that men tend to construct their level of capability in relation to notions of 'laziness' and lack of ability to organise their studies and time (see Archer 2003; Jackson 2002; Burke 2006). This is related to the construction of masculinity and the problematic notion that men are 'naturally' lazy (Epstein et al. 1997), which might undermine a sense of academic capability (Burke 2006). This resonates with Fred's account when he was asked whether family was an influence on his expectations of what he would do:

Yeah. Well, they all said that I was capable of going to uni. But I also just got a bit lazy at school.

Although it is often claimed that 'traditional students' have higher aspirations than students from lower SES backgrounds, Devlin and McKay challenge these claims by drawing on the findings emerging from their research, which focused on 'successful students from low SES backgrounds'. The students expressed high levels of aspiration and determination to succeed in their studies and the students viewed success to be a result of working hard, planning, and attitude. Devlin and McKay argue that all of these are influenced by family context (Devlin & McKay 2014, p. 112) and some of the data support this point. Frances said:

A lot of my friends have family that hasn't studied and are themselves studying. I mean, there are plenty of people whose parents have as well but in my circle parents' education hasn't really seemed to have impacted whether people are studying or not. Yeah, I'm one of nine kids. So yeah, we have to – I want to get – yeah, my parents have worked very hard, and have influenced us just so much with how hard they've worked. Like we've struggled quite a bit, well when I was younger, coming into university we were still struggling. I really wanted to – I just really wanted to do well, just because I don't want to struggle any more in terms of financial status and just all of that... I really wanted to show them that I can achieve. Just make my parents proud.

The student accounts suggest that family influences are significant in shaping constructions of capability and educational aspirations but do not determine this in any straightforward way. Drawing on our analysis of the data, we suggest that constructions of capability and aspirations are connected to the different and contested discourses of capability circulating in different social contexts, including (but not only) complex family relations.

Intersecting identities and equity groupings

Constructions of capability have been connected to equity groupings but this requires a nuanced analysis of the ways that identities and structural inequalities are intersecting dimensions, forming, and reforming, a sense of 'capability' and belonging in higher education. For example, much of the international policy debate (particularly in higher income countries) suggests that men might be seen as an equity group due to their lower participation rates across undergraduate education (James et al. 2004, p. 25; James et al. 2008, p. 114). However, feminist, critical and poststructuralist scholars have argued that this over-simplifies the picture by ignoring the ways that gendered inequalities are intersecting and contextualised sets of difference, identity and subjectivity (Burke 2012; Morley & Lugg 2009; Abes, Jones, & McEwen 2007; Reay 2003). It also fails to engage the complex formations of masculinity that shape boys' and men's experiences of schooling and education and of themselves as students or learners (Epstein et al. 1997; Jackson 2002; Burke 2006).

Harold's reflection of his experiences at work and his understanding of the purpose of his participation in higher education shows how masculinity, work and education are inter-related social dimensions, shaping aspirations and sensibilities of capability. He sees university study as giving him the opportunity to move out of a working life fraught with the risk of injury and particular masculine cultures to working opportunities that he describes as 'white collar':

Yes and also to go from a trade where it's all blokes and swearing and bravado and a modicum of violence to sort of a more – I don't know – white collar environment anyway. It sounds a bit shallow, it's about the money. It's not about the money, it's about the experiences and the time money can buy you. But it's about getting the most out of your working life and not suffering injuries because there's a lot more injuries and...

Students form their sense of capability not only within higher education but also from their gendered experiences in other social contexts. For example, Lawrence describes his military training, which enabled him to develop a sense of 'hard work', arguably challenging those forms of masculinity that emphasise notions of natural male laziness:

Yeah and experiences and the hard work and the different things you've got to do. If you're working in Darwin in full webbing and rifle gear in a practice exercise and it's 40 degrees and there's flies and humidity and you're out on the top of the jet in the blistering sun and you've just about had it but that jet has got to go flying, then you kind of learn to dig that little bit deeper and get whatever job it is you're doing done because you know at the end of that you can go for a drink of water or something or whatever you need. But you've got to do that...

Constructions of capability also emerged in the students' narratives of their peers. Shirley talks about the intersection between age, parenthood and the 'capability' of mature students who are juggling childcare commitments:

I think people in their forties, fifties and sixties, I honestly take my hat off to them especially if they have kids because I don't know how they do it. I don't know how they fit it in. I was only saying the other day, people with kids, I don't know how they do it. So I guess their perception of if they're capable or not would be different to mine because I don't have – I already think uni can be difficult at times and stressful but if you add kids into it, I guess they would question their capability of getting things done on time.

Insights from the conceptual field of equity in higher education shed light on how policy and institutional and pedagogical constructions of 'equity groups' often overlook differences within and across broad groups, such as 'mature students' as a grouping for example. This points to the need to nuance our understanding of the ways teacher and student identity formations are complex and intersecting sets of differences.



Emotion, belonging and capability



Key themes:

Fear, shame and anxiety produce and reproduce feelings of incapability and not belonging for many students.

Students' are often fearful of being judged or perceived as lacking capability and this often disrupts full participation and the quality of learning.

Students feel best in a supportive pedagogical environment in which trust is established.

Constructions of capability are contested not fixed and stable but are tied to feelings of belonging and fitting in.

Feelings of belonging are complex and tied to social relations and inequalities.

In this section, we will explore the ways that 'lack of capability' is tied to the emotional processes of misrecognition, which are felt in and through the body. Misrecognition as a concept sheds light on the subtle and insidious ways that different bodies and individuals are positioned, constructed and mobilised across and within pedagogical spaces through academic practices of classification, judgment and assessment.

All students are vulnerable to being constructed as 'lacking capability' through such practices, but arguably those students associated with equity policies and discourses are most at risk of being perceived as 'undeserving' and 'unworthy' of higher education participation due to the ways that widening participation tends to be connected to anxieties about lowering of standards (Lizzio & Wilson 2013; Burke 2012; Smit 2012; Yorke & Thomas 2003, p. 68). It is important to note that students themselves actively reproduce relations of misrecognition through the sometimes self-denigrating discourses they take up and the ways that fear of failure plays into such processes.

Fear and anxiety of being (seen as) 'incapable'

Misrecognition involves processes in which a pathologising gaze is projected on to those bodies and selves that have historically been constructed as a problem, and as suffering from a range of deficit disorders (e.g. lack of aspiration, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, lack of resilience and so forth) (Burke 2012). Through such processes, those bodies become marked as different through (often implicit and subtle) reference to deficit discourses and this is a relational process closely linked to pedagogical practices and discourses in both compulsory schooling and higher education. The injuries of misrecognition are often embodied, through the internalisation of shame and self-denigration and the fear of not being 'good enough' (Raphael Reed et al. 2007). This is tied to the emotional level of pedagogical autobiographies and experiences. Karen, for example, explains how previous experiences of Mathematics at school often continue to create high levels of anxiety about studying Mathematics at university:

Yeah, and some of our students with maths particularly have a very great high level of maths anxiety from previous bad experiences at school, and that's where we have to be very careful with them so that some will improve with a lot of encouragement, and hard work.

The data reveals the intensive forms of anxiety many students experience during their transitions to university and throughout their studies, connected to their sense of (in)capability and the anxieties attached to being assessed, judged and perceived as incapable by their teachers. For many students, the residual memory of shame from earlier educational experiences as well as the ongoing fear of being shamed again fuels such anxieties.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'symbolic violence' speaks to the ways that feelings of being 'stupid' in educational contexts are made to appear natural through the legitimisation of particular forms of cultural capital and ways of being (such as knowing how to pose the 'right' questions in class). It has been argued that 'shame' is a *social* emotion that is internalised as a feeling of lack of self-worth or sense of failure (Raphael Reed et al. 2007). Shame generates the emotions that 'produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects' (Ahmed 2004, p. 103).

When shamed, one's body seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject 'being against itself' (Ahmed 2004, p. 103).

Drawing on such insights illuminates the complexity of experiences of inclusion/exclusion connected to embodied experiences of symbolic violence across educational trajectories. Internalised memories of misrecognition tend to surface in physical and bodily symptoms; such as the many accounts of fear and anxiety emerging from the data collected for this project. Students' feelings of fear and anxiety about being seen (again) as 'incapable' are often translated through deficit discourses, and the remedy tends to be identified in various forms of remedial support, provided outside the formal teaching and learning space, such as counselling and study skills. Although such approaches might be helpful if combined with more careful attention to the complex pedagogical relations that are unwittingly complicit in the reproduction of feelings of incapability, decontextualised approaches tend to ignore the origins of students' fear and anxiety. The data show that this can sometimes reproduce constructions of incapability rather than help to build students' esteem and sense of confidence. Lack of attention to the complex power relations produced within such interactions of 'support', which requires that the student place 'trust' in a professional representing institutional values and perspectives, can exacerbate feelings of incapability. Students understand that it is inevitable that judgments are made through such interactions. For example, Beverly says:

But then your anxiety you, like, you don't necessarily want to say what's wrong because then you sort of feel stupid and that, like, it doesn't mean anything. It's not worth [saying it]. Another thing is it's not... I know that the uni offers... they've got the counselling and the psychology clinic or whatever. But, like, for me I don't feel comfortable sort of saying that to a stranger either. Then you feel even more stupid because it's, like, you don't know that person so you don't know how they think. Even though they might be – that's their job and they're accredited and they're not supposed to have judgments, people still have judgments so...

Students' ongoing fear of being judged or seen as incapable was a significant theme emerging in the accounts of both lecturers and students. One lecturer discusses the ways that fear of lack of capability often significantly constrains pedagogical participation, thus impacting on the quality of learning. Students are expected through their participation in higher education to develop strategies to build self-confidence and self-reliance, thus becoming the kind of student that might be recognised as 'independent' and 'resilient'. Inclusion thus rests on becoming a particular kind of person. Yet there is also the space for enabling and inclusive pedagogies to form through such understanding of 'capability'. Through pedagogical strategies, students' capability is not seen as fixed or innate but as something that might develop over time. Lecturer, Kevin says:

Some students will automatically believe oh I can't do it and have a panic. So part of what we need to teach them is self-confidence and reliance. Other ones will just – I just despair sometimes at how they don't – they ask questions such as when you say give a rationale for your idea and they say what do you mean by rationale? I literally will cut and paste the dictionary definition from the computer, the really simplest one, email it to them and they go oh now I understand. So I ask myself why did they not look up a dictionary on the computer let alone elsewhere?

The data suggest that students' relationships with their tutors deeply shape their pedagogical participation and the quality of their learning. The following student, Betty, explains that a tutor's level of 'approachability' has a significant impact on students' confidence in asking questions in tutorials and seminars. She suggests that the approachability of her Maths teacher is connected to the personal stories he shares with his students, which positively colours her experiences of the subject itself. However, she finds her Law teacher intimidating, which creates considerable anxiety for her and this effects her participation as a student.

Yes. I think the more engaging a teacher is and sort of interesting it makes it much more fun to go to the lecture and makes it a lot more easier to remember what they are teaching. We had a really great lecturer for my maths subject. He was really funny. He was always telling us about his family and he had a small baby and he was telling us about what had happened on the weekend with her. He was always telling us these little stories. It just made it so much more interesting.

He did seem very approachable and that was one of the issues I had with one of my law tutors was that she was quite scary. If you had a question about something you were a bit nervous to ask her. I had to ask her about something one day and it was right at the beginning and I was a bit lost because it was only my second week or something. She kind of asked me if I was even listening the last tutorial. I thought that was a bit harsh because it's a bit overwhelming, all of the information you get in those first couple of weeks.

Similar themes emerged in relation to other pedagogical practices, such as formative feedback. Fear of being identified as 'incapable' often manifests itself in anxiety about sending in coursework for feedback from tutors, implying a fear of being identified through that draft work as 'incapable'. Debra says:

That's something that is important too, because you have students who really want to achieve high, you know they really want to get really good marks. While others just want to pass. So that makes a difference as well. So those who want to achieve really high tend to send their essay plan to get some feedback. So we might come back to confidence as well, you know they think it's not good enough to send to the lecturer.

This raises a number of pedagogical concerns and challenges for university lecturers to consider and reflect on. Students' transitions to university are often fragile (Abbott-Chapman 2011; O'Donnell & Tobbell 2007; Hillman 2005), particularly if they have had previous experiences of education which created a sense of 'incapability'. Students come to university with a range of educational experiences and expectations and are deeply sensitive to their own position as a university student (Christie et al. 2008; Krause et al. 2005). Having a sense of 'the right to higher education' is a delicate balance between developing a sense of capability and confidence and the kinds of pedagogical relations being (re)formed (Burke 2012; Burke et al. 2013). The following teacher, Samuel, articulates well the delicate balance between support and challenge required in relation to developing students' confidence and sense of capability within the context of the subject(s) they are studying.

Opportunity, confidence, stimulus, the right mix of support and challenge. So you have to be pushed enough beyond your current capacities, either internally or externally, to want to solve your problems. But you have to be not pushed so far that you are afraid of, to the point where you don't keep on problem solving, trying or that you are afraid that that will interfere with your capacity to achieve it, but if it's not too badly it will only degrade it, it won't stop it entirely so you can find your way past it. So basically confidence, the right balance of support and challenge, opportunity...

Zara explains that developing a sense of confidence in students demands a supportive environment in which a trusting pedagogical relationship is formed.

It's a strong thing, and I would say it takes a good half a semester to get them to feel confident over that fear of failure, and it's building that relationship with the students and providing that supportive environment, and so then they get to the point where they go and trust.

The data reinforced the argument that fear of incapability is a key barrier to learning and academic achievement and success. Zara continues:

From my experience in teaching; fear of failure, fear of making mistakes and maybe a fear that they don't have the intelligence to do what they want to do, they don't have the self-belief that they can learn something new that can be a benefit to them.

Some that come in are mental problems, around anxiety and depression, that impact on a student's ability to participate with others and also to complete tasks on time because their anxiety overwhelms them. Whether it's the anxiety of completing a task – and I see that quite a lot, and you say to them just complete it, so whether it's the fear of failure or a lack of self-belief in doing it, or something around – or avoidance of being judged, they don't want to be judged, some of them find that very confronting, very confronting. Depending on how you judge them it goes to their self-belief that they can do the course – but I got a bad mark so I'm no good, no you're not no good, but what did everyone else get – it's not what everyone else gets, it's the progress you make, that's what's important. You're learning how to be a university student, it's a whole new world, you've got to learn the rules. So you've got to learn how to do...

The data show that many teachers have an understanding of the ways that a fear of failure can have a significant impact and that the process of 'learning how to be a student' takes time. The process of becoming a student who feels and is seen as capable at university is enabled through pedagogical strategies aiming to foster a sense of belonging for students, particularly those who have suffered the injuries of misrecognition.

Feelings of belonging (and not belonging)

The emotional dimensions of belonging have been identified as key in research on equity in higher education (O'Keefe 2013; Krause & Coates 2008; Christie et al. 2008; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld 2005). Belonging, or not, is connected to identity-formation and the ways one might feel as an outsider or insider (Burke 2002). Legitimation as a 'proper' and 'deserving' student of higher education centres on discourses of belonging. This is linked to wider discourses about the 'dumbing down' of higher education and notions that as HE participation is widened to diverse groups of students, academic standards are being threatened. This is connected to practices of standardisation, including of admissions, such as the practices around the ATAR and the status such practices have in ensuring that only 'capable' students gain entry to higher education. Notions of capability are inextricably tied to such practices, so that those who come through 'alternative' routes are already entangled in discourses that construct them ('non-traditional' students) as lacking the appropriate capability, because they have not succeeded in achieving the appropriate ATAR scores. This is deeply problematic as it fails to understand that constructions of capability are tied to social inequalities and processes of misrecognition across a person's life trajectory of engagement with institutionalised systems that (often unwittingly) reproduce inequalities, including through compulsory schooling (Gillborn & Youdell 2000). Students themselves are aware of, and reproduce, constructions of capability that are tied to entrenched educational and social inequalities. For example, Ellie commented:

...those who come in and they think 'oh I'm so stupid, I only got an ATAR of 30, I don't even know why I'm here, I don't think that I'm university material', and it's constantly downplaying themselves, and it really is. It seems to be just two entirely different schools of student that you're teaching.

Such concerns about the assumed correlation between capability and assessment systems such as the ATAR are reproduced in the lecturers' accounts as well. For example, Denise said:

I've always supported the underdog. What I probably have become more – sorry the thing that I think that I have changed about is the capability of the intelligent students, because I always have thought that the student who is more conscientious, resilient, will just stay in there, will achieve. What I have found is that that can still be possible for those people who come in with those ATARs of 90. You know, I always had this thing, you know, I prefer to be a credit average student who's got common sense than the HD student, because they've got no common sense. But I think what I've realised is that they can. You know, so there's this elasticity that is so individual in people. But when I found as well, because we have such a huge range of students from ATARs of 95 down to ATARs below 60 and what I found is that there becomes a point of no movement...

Yet constructions of capability are contested and are not fixed and stable. The following extract illuminates the contested understandings at play around who might be seen as capable or not. Denise continues:

And it's really a struggle personally for them seemingly, from you know, what I've seen is they really struggle and when they aren't able to maintain that, they see – and I'm looking at distinctions, credits, and they're feeling that they're not up to scratch, and I'm like, 'You know, you should be quite happy that you're able to progress'. And I really think that you can be – and I do see this – you know, the high ATARs do drop out, probably more so than the others, and that is because intelligence doesn't – you can't trade intelligence for commitment or resilience within a program. And my other thing is that if you get HDs and stuff all the time you might not – if you feel that you're so intelligent you might not ask for help. And I think sometimes that help is not always academic help because we won't always encourage those who have got HDs to get academic help, but we don't also, you know...?

Feelings of belonging then are not straightforward; Denise suggests that students are aware that the processes of being recognised as capable requires the performance of multiple attributes, including 'resilience' which is increasingly hegemonic in pedagogical discourses.


You know, so I've got the students that are so – they hang in there with the resilience that I couldn't believe, but they're so conscientious, they're doing all the supports they can but they just can't get the concepts. You know, they just can't – it's just not happening and...

Students' anxieties might be exacerbated by the feeling that although they exercise 'resilience' and 'hard work' and 'determination'; those attributes associated with pedagogical discourses of 'capability', they might still not belong in higher education because 'they just can't get the concepts'. This also reveals the complex ways that 'capability' is understood simultaneously in terms of something that is developed through particular pedagogical processes and as something you have or don't have.

However, some students, particularly mature students with greater life experiences to draw on, reject such discourses and develop a sense of belonging through their refusal to be judged. Beverly explains her sense of belonging in terms of her 'age and [her] life' and not caring if people think she's 'dumb'. She explains this shift in her confidence in relation to no longer being 'shy' to ask questions about aspects of the subject she does not understand. Not knowing, Beverly asserts, is unrelated to 'capability' and this understanding gives her a feeling that she belongs: 'I was confident then in my capability, because of my age and my life experience'.

The data show that students' feelings of belonging are connected to their relationship with their tutors. Frances describes how she feels that her tutor is 'always more than happy to see you' even though he is so busy and that this not only creates a sense of happiness for her but also inspires her to 'want to be like him':

Yeah and oh I was just so happy to have him. He's the reason I feel so motivated, like especially now. Because I want to be like him. He was just so great... I never really had a high school mentor, role model. No, and they ask you that in education, they're like oh was there a teacher who really influenced you, and did you want to be just like them? No. This one is probably the closest I'll get.



**Students' feelings
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Similarly, Shirley explains that having continuity and developing a relationship with a tutor is important to having a sense of belonging. This raises issues around the casualisation of HE teaching, which could undermine students' feelings of belonging and security in their pedagogical participation.

I think the tutorial groups where you have the same tutor and you're in the same group so you become comfortable with your surroundings so you can speak up and ask questions and things like that whereas if you have tutors changing constantly, like you're constantly doing 'get-to-know-each-other' activities and things like that that don't really help your learning – so when you're constantly changing tutors I guess and then it's not comfortable for the group and then they don't speak up and they don't answer questions.

The facilitator then asked: 'So you need to develop a relationship with your tutor?' Shirley replied:

Yeah because then you know that you can contact them and they're not going to have any worries about you contacting them to help you whereas with the other ones, you never really know – if you're trying to do an assignment for this topic but you've got that tutor at the time, do you contact that tutor or do you contact that one?

Lucille's narrative illuminates how feelings of belonging are entwined in different social formations of class and gender (Skeggs 1997) and are also connected to family histories and narratives. Lucille talked about the people around her that were not going to university because she came from a working class school:

Most of the kids' parents and stuff – my parents were always a little bit different which made me a little bit different, just a little bit different. Yes, we didn't have any money or anything but we had a bit of an education. But my family's always been a bit like that too. My uncle was really, really smart and he won a scholarship to go to university to do dentistry when he couldn't afford – like before Whitlam and all of that sort of stuff. My grandfather was an engineer so... No, I don't think there was. People just always sort of expected me to be doing more than I was. I always seemed to be not coming up to par or what people thought that I could do so that's how I always felt. Maybe in my primary years there was a bit more emphasis on the boys – yes I never – maybe because – my dad's a feminist so maybe he's just...

Lucille's feelings of (not) belonging are also shaped by peer relations and she recalls the impact of being bullied at school. She explains this in relation to her self-perception as being 'a bit odd' in high school. Her relationship with her best friend later in life provided her with further inner resources to foster a sense of belonging as a university student. She said:

I think I've had fears of being social since I was a teenager because I got bullied pretty severely because I was a bit odd in high school. So I have had trust issues. But I enjoy people and it's just that I'm not really good at letting people too close... So I've sort of got my friend, who was my best friend in high school. We didn't meet back up until I was 30 but still I'm sort of really family – us – orientated.

The data from this project reinforces other research in the field that feelings of belonging are complex and tied to a myriad of social relations and positions (Burke et al. 2013).

Pedagogical spaces and practices



Key points:

There is a relationship between external commitments and students' views about their capability.

Discourses that blame individuals tend to exacerbate feelings of incapability in both teachers and students.

Pressure on teachers to meet expectations of excellence and equity was described as highly challenging within existing structures.

Academic confidence has a significant impact on students' academic success.

Teaching staff perceived competing discourses of collaboration and competition to have an effect on student capability.

Pedagogical relationships and experiences are tied to broader, complex power relations and the politics of difference (Burke et al. 2013). These pedagogical relations often reinforce hegemonic discourses and assumptions about capability (both old and new) that circulate in higher education and society – even when the participants in learning and teaching are largely unaware of these complex relational dynamics. Awareness of these dynamics of power, their complexities, and the socio-historical discourses that influence them is an important way of working towards better practices and spaces that foster inclusion. For example, Burke et al. (2013) explain that ‘some pedagogical practices fail to engage students who display at times forms of resistance to or alienation from the learning experience or who do not display behaviours considered “appropriate” to classes like “shyness”, which is concerning given that diversity and equity are foregrounded in higher education policy and principles within practice’ (p. 4). Given that much of the discussion contributed by both teachers and learners in this research project operates at the level of the relational and emotional, careful consideration needs to be paid to these ‘invisible’ aspects.

Students explained that their attendance, engagement and views about their capability in courses are determined to a large extent by dis/engaging pedagogical practices and unavoidable commitments like work. Many students spoke about the difficulties of work and the impact it has on study. When asked what could make a difference to their capability, many answered that not having to work or not having to work so much would make a big difference.

The project analysis reveals that capability is constructed through complex classroom relational dynamics, which are based on the interplay between socio-economic-cultural forces and contexts, pedagogical practices and intersecting identity formations. From the interviews and focus groups, it was evident that although the students and staff expressed that capability in higher education is contextual and relational, at times, they also tended to decontextualise it from the wider socio-historical context they had previously described. Even though staff and student participants explained the significant impact of family, school and other life experience factors on capability and perceptions of it over time, they also explained capability in terms of individual choice and decision-making, and there were clear emotional aspects to this. For example, descriptions of a disconnect in expectations between students and staff was expressed as troubling, demotivating and the source of tension for both groups. These competing discourses are detailed and analysed in the following section.

Attendance and engagement

Most students talked about the classes they decided not to attend in relation to feelings of disconnection in the classroom interactions. For example, Earl spoke about his experiences of pedagogical practice in Mathematics where he described an environment that was ‘distracting’. Because of this, he felt he was able to concentrate on the lecturer’s voice better online and said:

...when everyone is talking you can’t really hear much and it’s very distracting the environment, except when you’re sitting by yourself in a room and just headphones and you can only see the screen and you can only hear his voice and the other voice. So it’s kind of more motivating to not go to lectures and stay and watch them.

The use of presentation software such as PowerPoint can sometimes also be experienced as disconnecting for students. There seems to be a contradiction in the expectations of both lecturers and students that might send a confusing signal. On the one hand, the presentation slides must be made available online to students in a way that is accessible and this suggests that the slides themselves must be comprehensive enough to be used as a pedagogical tool. It also suggests that students might be able to use these to learn without having to attend lectures. On the other hand, students are expected to attend lectures but lecturers then use presentation slides, which need to serve the dual purpose of the online accessibility of pedagogical materials. Without appropriate pedagogical development provided to lecturers, it is not surprising that this might lead to the kind of scenario that Earl describes below:

...I think one of the problems with the lectures in some courses they’re really not very useful because some of the lecturers they just go through the slides. And they’re something that you can do at home yourself... You’re thinking they’re not elaborating at all.

The above sheds light on how such confusing practices and expectations might feed into sensibilities of lack of capability for both university teachers and students. Beverly described why she enjoys and values going to some lectures:

I’ve had some absolutely amazing lectures, like, lecturers, like, you want to go to every single one. And, like, you don’t want to stop because they’re so enthusiastic. And, like, they – they sort of teach you the content but in a way that’s sort of like a story. So you’re learning without even realising that you’re learning.

Students explained that even if they attend most classes, sometimes they weren't able to attend lectures because of unavoidable work and other commitments and that it was important to have the option to catch up through recordings and online resources.

Not only important for encouraging attendance, engaging teachers were described as providing greater motivation to study and this developed student capabilities. A student remarked: 'as soon as I'm interested, even if it's not something I generally like, if there's a lecturer or a tutor that makes it interesting or can relate it to things that I like I'm going to do 10 times better'. The students also talked about processes of recognition, in which a teacher's belief in their capability created a sense of capability. Another student explained: 'yeah, lecturers for example... She, she just believed that I can do that... And you just think "wow if someone believes"...'.

There appears to be general consensus amongst teaching staff across enabling and undergraduate programs that attendance rates are continuing to decrease. Lecturer, Kenneth said that 'it's a bit odd because nobody is going to the lectures – out of 200, it is down to about 15 students attending'. Across the board, teaching staff spoke about declining attendance: 'the more the semester goes on, the more students drop out or just don't turn up anymore...'. This disengagement was experienced by some staff as confusing and upsetting at times. Ellie described the process of student attendance as it 'dwindles' over time and how she has come to view the sustained attenders as the ones who she will then build strong pedagogical relationships with:

...what you're left with – even though numbers are really low, and as an educator that can sometimes sort of really impact on your morale – but ultimately what you're left with are the students who are engaged and the ones that do want to be here. So they're the ones that you do build up a rapport with, because they want your assistance and they want your approval in a lot of ways as well.

Students' lack of engagement was often explained in terms of students having unreasonable expectations and demands. The pressures and expectations placed on individuals often generates a projection of blame, which is unhelpful for both staff and students and contributes to a sense of incapability on both sides. For example, Ellie continued:

Unfortunately, a lot of the ones that are bordering on arrogance, they don't come... No, they don't attend. A lot of them will still stay in the program, and we have evidence of students who – I was just having a chat with a colleague, and he said that he has received a whole lot of essays of students that he thought had dropped out, that have zero attendance effectively. Or maybe they came to the first one.

They have just sporadic little quiz marks or something like that across the semester, but then they're submitting their final work. So clearly they're... they're not coming, they're not engaging, they're not – obviously no participation whatsoever as far as we're concerned – but they feel that they have this ability to get through without having to do anything. Yeah, and I'm constantly thinking about how can I make this exciting? I know that learning how to write an essay is not the most exciting thing, and because I feel that students are so – they do have such short attention spans – then they think well I could sit here... This year, it seems that yeah it was really – I mean they could be interested, but they didn't have the time to do the reading. So you wonder you know what is it they expect from us, you know.

Therefore, both staff and students felt that behaviours that suggested a lack of engagement were damaging to pedagogical relationships, spaces and capabilities. A lecturer described the contrast between the 'engaged' and 'disinterested' students, perhaps reinforcing problematic constructions:

And those students who come each week, they've got all of their lecture slides with them printed out ready to make notes on, the course notes with them, the textbook and such. Then there are those students who rock up with a phone and sit and listen or play Bejewelled Blitz. Or a weird thing is following the slides on the phone that are on the screen in front of them, I don't understand that. You know whether it be instant entertainment, instant information, instant communication... and I think this sense of actually having to work for something to get a result is almost foreign...

At other points, teaching staff talked about the ways that students are encouraged to understand learning as 'passive consumption' through wider university and sector discourse. Kevin commented about the wording of student feedback questionnaires:

But also I was looking at the tone of those questions and it felt all wrong. It felt like the tone was 'Is your lecturer being sufficiently sort of obsequious to you?'. We're here to help. We really are here to help. But that tone put the responsibility of the learning on the lecturer and not on the student and we need the exact opposite. We need all of our messages to be conveying that the students are themselves responsible for their own learning and then responsible for their own achievement once they have learnt. It's their achievement, not mine. So it's a small thing in all of the things that add up, but I really think we should change the tone of our SFTs [Student Feedback on Teaching surveys] so that they shift that responsibility.

This point reveals how the central relational aspects of teaching and learning are not conveyed to students when they are encouraged to consider their teachers as delivering learning to them. This type of consumer discourse, which lacks critical recognition of the mutual engagement required in pedagogical relationships, was described by staff as undermining and disempowering for both students and staff.

Students described teachers who approached lecturing as teaching to and for themselves (for example, merely reading slides, being distracted and going off-topic too much) and others who were inspiring, inclusive, interactive and connected to the students' needs and goals. Students described disconnected teachers as those who teach for and to their own vision (their ideas or ideals of a student) whereas connected teachers were described as those who engaged with students in all their diversity. Recognition of the relational dynamic that is so critical to good teaching was clearly expressed in student discussions. It is important to note that the 'capabilities' articulated by the students in relation to their perceptions of good teaching are similarly constructed and related to processes of (mis)recognition. Individual teachers are not reducible to a single description of their teaching. Furthermore, teaching practices are developed through pedagogical understanding, which depends on having appropriate forms of continuing professional development from institutions.

However, despite these insights, often both students and staff 'fell in and out' of reducing both successes and challenges to the individual fault of others, and the notion of a 'good' teacher and a 'good' student was often described as something that is individual (a conscious individual choice), rather than a complex, often sub-conscious, socio-cultural construction.

Thus, a series of important paradoxes surfaced during interviews and focus groups. Students and staff talked about the relational nature of teaching and learning, and the significant influence and impact of previous experiences and contextual factors; however, many would then disrupt these insights with comments that tended to reduce problems to individual blame. This seemed to be a mechanism by which both students and staff were able to cope with the complex emotional dynamics involved when hurtful elements in pedagogical relations were described. For example, when students and staff did not feel recognised for their work (particularly when students did not receive affirming responses from their teachers and when staff felt abandoned and disrespected by students) they tended to externalise blame as a self-protective response to perceived, albeit indirect, criticism. Importantly, this tendency to blame individuals also ties into wider discourses of pressure and blame on teachers and students for not being 'good' enough and for dumbing-down education (Burke 2012; Torres in Burke 2012).

What is learning: journeys vs outcomes?

An interesting contradiction became apparent in teachers' discussions about pedagogy. Even though their descriptions were focused on learning as a process (rather than about outcomes, which is how teachers described the students as erroneously focusing too much on), staff also conveyed how they too are outcomes-focused in terms of ensuring that skills and content knowledge are developed. Pressure on teachers to produce knowing and skilled students was described as stressful and often in terms of a frustration about what was possible within existing structures and sets of expectations. The sense of change in students' attitudes to learning, and their readiness to learn, were identified as 'problems'. Lack of 'readiness' to study in higher education was described as a distinct and challenging change: 'the students who came (in the past) were probably the ones who had already learnt how to learn. Whereas now I think we actually need to teach learning how to learn'. With less time and more students, both students and staff explained how this environment presents them with significant challenges.

Due to structural constraints and other demands, and despite a clear joy and commitment to the learning process, student outcomes were the main focus and source of tension for staff. The main approaches to help students achieve this were expressed as helping them to build their confidence and self-belief during their study. It is interesting that staff did not articulate their approach as outcomes driven, but instead as 'journey' focused. The ways that teaching and graduate 'quality' are constructed in higher education and beyond were described as intensifying pressures for teaching and learning and for students and staff.

**Teaching practices
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development from
institutions.**

Mis/recognition and judgments of 'intelligence'

Students raised concerns about the ways some students were recognised as especially intelligent based on particular practices (such as asking questions), which set them up as being above the rest. For example, in the following discussion with the interviewer, Joyce said:

Joyce: I think they prefer the students who have the different ideas. They really like the students who like to speak up when they just deliver – I have a very deep impression about a student from my last semester and every class, probably I can exaggerate, every five minutes she [another student] asked a question and so many questions. But the tutor just liked it and at the end of the semester he said [to the other student], 'You are the most intelligent student who I ever met'.

Facilitator: He said that in the class?

Joyce: Yeah, in the class. Just so many questions, just pumping, pumping... We don't have time, we don't have the opportunities, yeah.

Gillborn and Youdell (2000) describe the invisible 'educational triage' work that teachers do, which are mostly sub-conscious and driven by complex relational and contextual factors. This sheds light on how encounters such as the above develop. Rather than conscious acts of exclusion, processes of (mis)recognition in such encounters are often enacted without due recognition of the socio-cultural constructions of 'capability' (Burke & McManus 2009; Skeggs 2004; Wilkins & Burke 2013). Building awareness of the powerful exclusionary aspects of these interactions, and consideration of who is left out and why, is therefore critical to professional pedagogical development. The ways that judgments are formed about who is most likely to do well in higher education (and those who display/do not display 'promise' of research 'talent' and 'potential' as post graduates), are often not discussed and interrogated. Frances describes what she perceived to be a nonjudgmental, respectful lecturer:

Yes. Mutual respect, straight away. He always – he didn't care what you looked like, if you looked like you were from a specific stereotype. Just automatically respected you.

What capabilities are important for students and how are they constructed?

Examining what constitutes 'capability' led to some lengthy discussions within the project team, especially regarding the enabling program teachers' transcripts, because it is often presumed that enabling staff assume no, to very little, previous experience of higher education given that many students will be first-in-family (FIF) (in 2014, 63% of enabling students at the university were identified as FIF). However, from the interviews, it became clear that a baseline requirement of capabilities, including such diverse aspects as an ability to recognise what is required in terms of approach and attitudes, confidence – but not too much – a commitment to learn, enough stability at home and the support of family, are important to getting through.

Regarding what being 'capable' of studying at university is, overall, teaching staff said:

- Capability rests on *being able to make the right value judgments* about what is required of them at university
- Capability is not innate intelligence
- A basic level of capability is required (as outlined below)
- It is the responsibility of educators to build from capabilities (as outlined on following page)

The necessary aspects discussed by teaching staff (though not necessarily observed) were:

- The right attitude
- Commitment
- Motivation
- Persistence
- Engagement and interest
- A basic level of intelligence or intellectual ability
- Confidence – security to make mistakes – but not too confident
- Resilience – being capable of coping with fear of failure/challenge
- Study skills – knowing how to learn and strategise

Arguably, all but one in the above list ('having a basic level of intelligence') are middle class dispositions, values and aesthetics of existence (Bourdieu 1984; Foucault 1959), which are taken-for-granted in the everyday and form the basis by which 'capability' is measured and (mis)recognised in higher education.

The skills required for success within higher education identified by teaching staff were:

- Academic literacy
- Time management
- Strategic ability (ability to recognise and navigate the field of learning higher education, and a willingness to conform to requirements)
- Managing expectations of themselves

Teaching staff described their work in building capability as developed through:

- Providing feedback
- Being empathetic and challenging assumptions
- Awareness and sensitivity to past limiting stereotypes of labelling of students as incapable (at school)
- Recognising pressures/contextual factors that impact on learning
- Connecting with students
- Providing a safe space for learning
- Normalising struggle
- Teaching critical thinking
- Support
- Flexibility
- Engaging interest in learning beyond an instrumental, customer view

Teacher, Zara explained that she communicates with students about support:

I'll check in: are you worried about this, what are you worried about? Depending on what comes back – I said if you're worried about doing Maths calculations for example there's Maths support clinics. If you're worried about chemistry we've got drop in sessions. If you're worried about how to write...

Another teacher, Denise, talked about how she encourages students to connect with success in order to overcome past experiences that have limited their views of their capability:

Oh, I always start off the year with a lot of anecdotes... I do also look at basically some success stories, and of course I don't use names. But so if you're one of the students sitting there saying, 'I don't know what I'm doing here', then saying 'well, you know – giving an example of a student last year who was in your exact same spot – 'I can tell you now he just got into engineering'. That kind of thing.

The past

Students with more recent academic experience were perceived to have both greater ability and confidence due to their already developed skills such as an ability to analyse and discuss information. Others' previous academic experience was perceived to have an opposite effect of decreasing their feelings of confidence if they had not performed well in the past. In addition, past learning experiences and particularly the influence of the opinions of significant role models such as teachers and parents was perceived to have a direct impact on a student's feelings of capability.

Students spoke to lecturers about experiences at school and lecturers expressed concern about the labelling: 'Yeah, just it's all obviously second hand information, but from their perspective it seemed as if their teachers were putting them down.' One student commented when speaking of her peers: 'they just don't believe that they can do it because they've been told for so long that they can't'.

Describing the damaging effects of messages about lack of capability delivered by teachers in schools, a teacher, Grace, explained that 'I think the university... has a responsibility to get into the community and build... confidence, aspiration and connections with the institution. Somehow let these students know that they are capable.'

It was clear that some lecturers recognised the contribution and impact they themselves have on a student's capability. These interviewees expressed their understanding of the role the lecturer plays in developing an accurate perception of personal capability and discussed improved teaching methods such as reframing abstract ideas for the students to increase understanding. In this sense, the lecturer appears to be engaging in and taking responsibility for the development of student capability.

Confidence

Having confidence in one's ability to be able to complete academic work was identified as one component of academic capability. Academic confidence was a strong theme emerging from the data and is perceived to have a significant impact on students' academic success. While it is noted that other factors play a role in academic ability, a student's level of confidence was described as being able to override many other factors. Teacher, Grace, said:

Oh I think it does play a very big role. Those students who remain under-confident I think do not go as far in many ways... And I think that as soon as a student loses that confidence or they feel that they're overwhelmed by a concept and they fall behind, they find it's very difficult for them to catch up, you know, because as soon as that confidence starts to fall back... But if they can be supported and then they can improve that level of confidence, but that can only happen with conscientiousness and resilience...

It was recognised that confidence is contextual, and while a student may be confident in other aspects of their life, this may not necessarily translate into academic confidence. Evelyn said:

I suppose you could talk about different kinds of confidence as well. There's the confidence in a person as they are and their identity as a person outside of university, but then the confidence of the person and their identity as a student or within academia could be quite different.

Another student noted that people could be capable but not confident: 'you do need confidence with your capability. It's like, but it sort of goes hand in hand because just because you're not confident doesn't mean that you're not capable.' Students also commented that having an interest and, therefore, a higher level of motivation to the topic area is important. Interest and capability inform the other.

Students described confidence as depending on whether they had previous knowledge and/or experience that may be applied to a task, that is whether the context was familiar and whether the problem was familiar. In addition, if a student performed well in a particular area in previous study, their confidence and perception of capability to do well in the same area was higher. If a student performed well, they perceived themselves as 'smart' and vice versa. After receiving 100% in an assessment, a student explained that she phoned her mother: 'Mum, you know what? I'm not dumb, do you know that?'

Jennifer spoke about 'not feeling good' and 'not feeling capable at all' when confronted with unfamiliar courses. She explained that:

...as soon as I'm interested, even if it's not something I generally like, if there's a lecturer or a tutor that makes it interesting or can relate it to things that I like I'm going to do 10 times better... If you put me in a bio or a chem lab I feel great. I'm interested. I'm engaged. I'm going to do well because, like, I want to be there. If you sit me down in, like, to do an English essay or even physics I'd probably freak out, back off a bit in maths. I wouldn't be feeling good. I wouldn't be feeling capable at all.

Marilyn explained, 'if everybody is around you and they're sort of, like, 'Oh, you can't do anything', and you start believing them and you're, like, 'Well, I can't do this'.

Some students appear too confident to staff and it is perceived that this may also have a negative impact on performance: 'Often students come in with too much confidence, and strangely enough they are the ones who also seem to drift out, leave the course'.

Fear of failure

'Fear of failure' was a strong theme that emerged from the data. Interviewees described the importance of being able to provide a safe learning environment – one in which students are free to test their knowledge or ideas without repercussions for making mistakes. Interviewees described the importance of making mistakes in the learning process and the role of lecturer support and encouragement to do so in a way that does not lead to loss of confidence, but instead increased learning and understanding. A staff member explains that fear is an issue for students: 'from my experience in teaching, fear of failure, fear of making mistakes and maybe a fear that they don't have the intelligence to do what they want to do, they don't have the self-belief that they can learn something new that can be a benefit to them'. Teacher, Olivia talked about the way she addresses this:

Being aware that it's normal to struggle and being aware that it's normal to not know the right answer and I tell them I live in this – when I'm not teaching I live in this research world and in the research world if you knew the answer you wouldn't be bothering. The case where you know the answer is the boring case. It's the case where you don't know the answer that is the interesting case.

Shirley agreed with the importance of this approach:

I guess the constant reassurance that it's okay to not know. With our first assignments and stuff, there was a lot of – in our tutorials and there was group sessions and groups that are run to help you understand what's required of you as a university student, not a TAFE student, not a school student. As a university student that is different. I guess that really helped, the reassurance that it's okay to not get it right straight away because you're learning. That's why you're here. So I guess that helped. That's what helped me, I guess, knowing that it was okay to not get it right straight away.

Some staff discussed the importance of what they called 'non-judgmental' pedagogical positions and that 'it requires a very supportive academic to be open minded and not judgmental':

...to provide a supportive environment which is non-judgmental. Because if they don't have that confidence or that self-belief then maybe they need to develop it, but how can you develop it if you're not... (in a safe environment where you can figure out what your capabilities are and what you can and can't do.

Such perspectives suggest that confidence and capability can be developed through inclusive pedagogical practices and spaces rather than something that a student brings to higher education as part of their innate level of potential and ability.

Staff views of the source of the 'problem' with students: high school

Discussion in most staff interviews and focus groups related to concerns about rote learning and a narrow focus on ATAR scores rather than on learning processes. Lois said:

I think it's the high schools. I think the high schools are the problem. ...you know, you talk about maths? Well, they're not such great writers either because they're rote learning. They're ticking all the boxes to get the ATAR score and the ATAR score is the determinant. I wish we had other factors that we could use to determine who comes through our doors. I think that's part of the problem. We're dealing with a dysfunctional school system and we're the frontline to have to iron all that out. That's a massive task.

Interestingly, when asked how best to help students' transitioning between different educational environments, a student had similar sentiments. Earl said:

...throughout the HSC everything has steps and it's kind of pre-made, you've just got to follow it. But university is the exact opposite. Just like high school to senior school, Year 7 to Year 10, they don't prepare you for Year 11 and 12, it's not the same, there's a big jump. There's always big jumps between all three and it's dysfunctional. They say they prepare you for it, but they really don't... They should teach us how to study by ourselves and to learn how to get the information by ourselves – instead of it just being there and us having to go over it and memorise it.

As described above, learning in school was described as conflicting with the expectation that at university students will be ready to engage in independent learning. Staff interviewed for this project – who, by contributing their time, were interested in pedagogy and contributing to research about how to improve pedagogical relationships and outcomes – talked about their adoption of 'transition pedagogy' in order to deal with this change and to make more explicit the hidden forms of 'assumed knowledge' that operate in higher education. Transition pedagogy emphasises that students should not be presumed to be independent or adult learners on entry because their previous experiences of learning – about how to learn and perform – are vastly different to the ones they are presented with on entry to the university environment (Kift & Nelson 2005).

Transition pedagogy varies, and Gale (2012) and Gale and Parker (2014) define a transition approach as one that is often limited to first year 'induction'-style programs. They argue that learning and engagement should be mutual, and that attempts to simply 'boot-camp' (as Gale has described it) students into the established culture of the university – if 'students' assets [are not taken] seriously' – is not an engaged and inclusive approach to higher education. In their analysis of approaches to transition to higher education, Gale and Parker (2014) describe three models: induction (fitting in to a closed system); development (transformation over time to another educated identity); and becoming (mutual flexibility and engagement) (Gale & Parker 2014). The latter works on wider forms of change towards a system that values and includes a diversity of ways of knowing and doing.

Students' views of transition

Some of the students talked about transition as difficult. The structure of university differs significantly from that of school in that university requires greater individual learner responsibility. Students must manage their own time, plan their studies, and ensure work is completed on time. Students are no longer routinely reminded what needs to be done by when and resources are no longer supplied to students. Students must now research and locate materials beyond the provided subject resources. Further, university now requires knowledge to be applied and argued, not simply repeated. Students described this transition '...a bit of a shock with the fact, like, just with the lecture format and all that and how everything is in your own hands'. Joan recalled:

...back in high school it was, like, every single day they'd be, like, 'Okay, don't forget you've got this – you've got this assignment to do. You should be doing this now.' Then you get to uni and it's, like, 'Oh, yeah. It's due then.' Then you don't get any more reminders about it at all. It's, like, oh, I have to just plan my own time? How am I going to do this? And it's quite a big change I think...

Despite the 'shock', in hindsight (students were interviewed at the end of their first year), Dianne added:

...in school it is very – do exactly this and memorise these things – but then in university you have to actually think... I always found that high school was quite constricting in that sense. So I was quite pleased with the change.

The transition to life beyond school (for school leavers) with the introduction of other responsibilities not previously experienced such as managing time, money, balancing social relationships with study and developing a career made the change to university more stressful. Joan says:

I just think because I was so comfortable in high school, like, it was so easy and then suddenly you're, like, here and it's, like, 'Oh, wow, there's actually responsibility. I need a job. I need to study. This is, like, determines my whole life.' It's suddenly, like, so much pressure on. There's so much anxiety and you want to still have friends. So you're, like, 'When am I going to see my friends? When am I going to be by myself? When am I going to get money?' That sort of thing.

Comparisons to others to feel capable

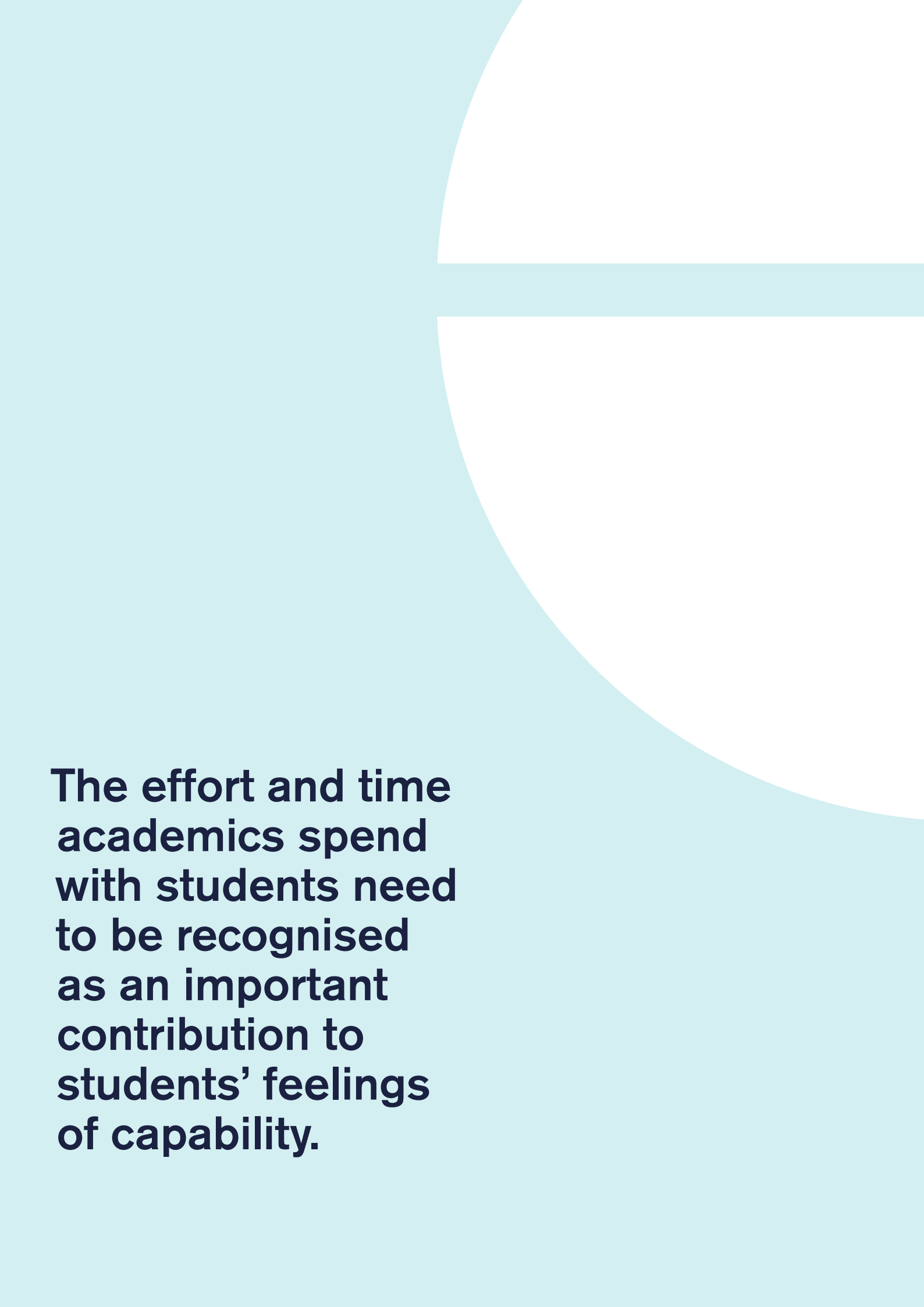
Some students, mostly school leavers, judged their capability and intelligence by comparing their results with those of their peers. Students noted their desire to compare their outcomes with others to gauge their overall satisfaction with, and confidence in, their performance. Students also perceived a sense of comfort and connectedness if they were not alone in their feelings of confusion or concern when attempting to complete work. Joan says:

When you come out of an exam and you're, like, 'Oh, you know, that question?' And everyone else is, like, 'Oh, I had no idea. I swear we didn't even learn that.' It just makes you feel better. Even if you got it wrong it's still, like, it's okay though because everyone got it wrong. So clearly I'm not an idiot. Everyone's just an idiot.

Joan also spoke about wanting lecturers to let them know how they were performing in relation to the cohort:

Like, I know that I'm smart but I can't – I can't really see it as such because I'm sort of a visual person. I like to know where I am and, like, see, like, with a graph or something like... just as long as you know that this is my mark and this is everybody else's mark, like, you don't need to know who it is or whatever. Like, it's just are you here or are you down here?

In some cases, a student's perception of intellectual positioning in the family influenced their self-efficacy. Students seemed to compare their academic achievements with those of their siblings and parents to judge their own academic ability. Heather expressed a common theme: 'I always felt dumb in the presence of my brother and sister and Mum and Dad and all that sort of stuff but in me I found I have always been street smart'.



The effort and time academics spend with students need to be recognised as an important contribution to students' feelings of capability.

Pedagogical relationships

Some students compared the supportive relationships they had with teachers in the school environment with teachers in the university environment and expressed disappointment at the lack of a personal relationship with any lecturers or tutors. Jennifer commented:

I think for me the main difference that I miss between uni and high school is you don't have that personal relationship with anyone at uni. There is an opportunity for it by all means, you know, I've found if I approach – if I approach lecturers or tutors, you know, they'll happily help me. But at the same time, I also feel like they wouldn't remember me and they're not going to stop me in the street and say, 'How are you going? You did really well in that task.' I think that just comes down to just it's so big. Not because they don't care, it's just so big.

Teaching staff also spoke about competing discourses of collaboration and competition and its effects on student capability. For example, Kevin spoke about the lack of collaboration between teachers: 'we need to be working in cooperation and collaboration, not in competition. But again too often the university is about competition and we need to put our egos aside and become reflective learners.'

In a focus group of three staff, the discussion focused on how the profession of teaching is not always as valued as it should be – the effort and time academics spend with students need to be recognised as an important contribution to students' feelings of capability. Within the contemporary competitive environment teachers have multiple, sometimes conflicting, responsibilities (teaching/research/administration), resulting in time constraints that impact on the quality of relationships between staff and students and between academic colleagues. Lois spoke about these conflicting demands in detail:

...there's also a great tension here I think between our responsibilities as researchers and our responsibilities as teachers. So that tension does my head in sometimes because I've got to be all things to all people. I would love to spend more time with my students but it just can't happen because we're pushed one way and pulled another. So that's entered into my classroom teaching. We've had a bit of a change at the law school the last couple of years so we had best teaching results across campus because it was really important to us. But that was going too far the other way too because you needed to have some sort of self – you can't sacrifice yourself to the teaching altar. The students pick up on it. The students are quite intuitive. That's the thing that stuns me. They seem to know everything that's going on and the relationship they have with their teachers is sometimes quite profound. They pick up on all this

stuff even though you don't think they are.

They know. So I think the human relationship dimension in teaching is really underestimated by the powers to be.

Throughout the data the point continually reemerged that in order to improve teaching and learning, it is vital to understand and acknowledge the social relations that shape pedagogical experiences and identities. These relations are formed within pedagogical spaces (virtual and physical) that develop (or undermine) capability, confidence and belonging.

Pedagogical spaces that develop capability

There was a fairly general consensus amongst students (enrolled on-campus, not as online program students) that to do well you need to 'turn up' to most classes (physically attend lectures and tutorials), even if you feel you are being 'lectured at'. However, the online environment was also described as a significant contributor to feelings of capability, especially if students could not attend classes because of unavoidable commitments and/or when students felt disconnected in the lecture environment. For example, a student mentions the flexibility of the online environment: 'I like the independence of that, and everything you could possibly need (is) at your fingertips'. Similarly, Beverly talks about the ability to manipulate the pace of learning in the online environment:

It's really handy if there's something which they're talking about in the lecture which, like, you really don't grasp or you don't understand. Because then you can pause it, get all the information you need down... whereas when you're in the actual lecture, like, if you don't understand something you're sort of, like, 'Oh, I don't get that'. But then you have to quickly move on to the next thing and it's, like, I've got to get everything else down.

Whilst contributing to their feelings of capability, for this sample of students the online environment is believed to be a necessary resource when used in conjunction with face-to-face learning. For example, a student said, 'I also like the face-to-face environment where you're all there in the same room and you're all – a sort of vibe going that you all want to learn and – it's sort of a tough thing to describe'.

Betty commented:

I thought it was very interesting that a lot of people don't come to their lectures, they just watch them all online... If I had to do it on the online environment I think I would probably have not done as well mainly because I'd be just sitting on my computer listening to the lecture and then go, 'this isn't particularly exciting I could have a break'. Whereas if you're in the lecture you've got to stay there for the whole time and you've got nothing else to focus on... (and) you just have more exposure and it helps it sink in.

Small group collaborations and significant connections between teachers and students are not always possible in contemporary university environments where mass lectures are the norm. One academic said:

The thing that gets me is lectures. They're the thing I don't get. All these mass crowds of 100/200/300 students being talked to with direct instruction for an hour and that's deep learning? I don't see that. They don't even do that in schools for goodness sake. It's an economic imperative that forces universities to do that. I think what's going to help students is more tutorials, more personalised tutorials.

He spoke nostalgically about his time as a student in a small group understanding poetry, 'When I was at university I'd go to tutorials and we'd have groups of 10 sitting in an office with a lecturer taking us through what it actually means to understand poetry. Boy that helped me much more than going to the mass English lecture and switching off...'

In the contemporary university setting, most students said they felt more capable of learning new tasks and problem solving in small group settings and generally this is their preferred pedagogical practice. For example, Robyn said:

I think tutorials are really good because there are less people, less students in a room and they have – they can have more interaction with the tutor. But lectures you have to just listen passively to the information you're receiving and you – I think the most intelligent person can't learn everything 100 per cent in the lectures. It's just that it gives you an idea but you have to go and study.

Similarly, Betty spoke about the importance of small group connections in Maths:

I think the tutorials are actually really good because I don't have one for my bio class. The lecture is too big so we just have two lectures instead of a lecture and a tutorial. With tutorials because people get sat next to each other you just kind of get chatting. So I've made, I think, sort of four pretty good friends out of my maths tutorial and we sort of all sat next to each other every tutorial and then at the end of it we all added each other on Facebook so there's sort of more connections there.

In many ways, the experiences articulated in this research echo the teaching and learning environment in the UK. Indeed, drawing on their study of pedagogical spaces in the UK, Burke et al. (2013) argue that:

...the importance of such critical and reflexive dialogic spaces cannot be underestimated; both students and teachers demonstrated a sophisticated level of reflection and thought about pedagogical practices and relations and the importance of gender and social identities in shaping these. However, without this research there is very little institutional space to consider pedagogical issues beyond the management and bureaucratic levels and this is problematic given the changing nature of higher education and the immense expectations on staff and students within diverse, hierarchical and competitive HE contexts.

Much more is needed to explore the complex dynamics at play in pedagogical constructions of student capability. In particular, mutual reciprocity needs to be recognised as an integral part of enabling good pedagogical relationships and spaces, so that they are more satisfying and rewarding for more people.

Conclusions



Key recommendations:

Raising awareness across the HE sector about the relationship between deficit discourses, assumptions and judgments about capability and students' level of confidence is vital for widening participation in higher education.

It is important that universities pay closer attention to the ways that assumptions and judgments about capability might unwittingly reproduce inequalities in student access, participation and success.

University lecturers must be appropriately supported by their institutions to develop pedagogical practices that create an environment of trust, belonging and inclusion.

There needs to be greater emphasis on building confidence and a sense of capability for school aged students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds.

Schools and universities must proactively challenge stereotypes about the 'types' of students who are capable of university study.

Opportunities, resources and support that enable capability, build confidence and foster belonging must be made available to students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds to build greater equity in higher education.

Attention needs to be shifted away from blaming individual teachers and students to generating educational structures, cultures and practices that are underpinned by strong principles of equity and inclusion for both staff and students.

This project has explored the different meanings attached to 'capability' across a range of pedagogical spaces and contexts. It has considered the ways these meanings shape the experiences, practices and sense of belonging of students from diverse backgrounds. The project aims to help improve the educational opportunities and completion rates for university students from under-represented backgrounds through contributing a more nuanced understanding of capability.

The project will be generating continuing professional development (CPD) resources and materials to address this aim, drawing on the themes, data and analysis presented in this report. This will be freely available and accessible to all stakeholders across the higher education sector from early 2016, through both the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE: <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au>) and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE: www.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe) websites.

The CPD materials will be designed to be accessible and to support university teachers in developing practices that challenge problematic constructions of capability, build student confidence and foster pedagogical spaces that are inclusive, create connection and belonging for students and are able to validate the different forms of experience and knowledge students bring to their learning to reinforce a sense of capability.

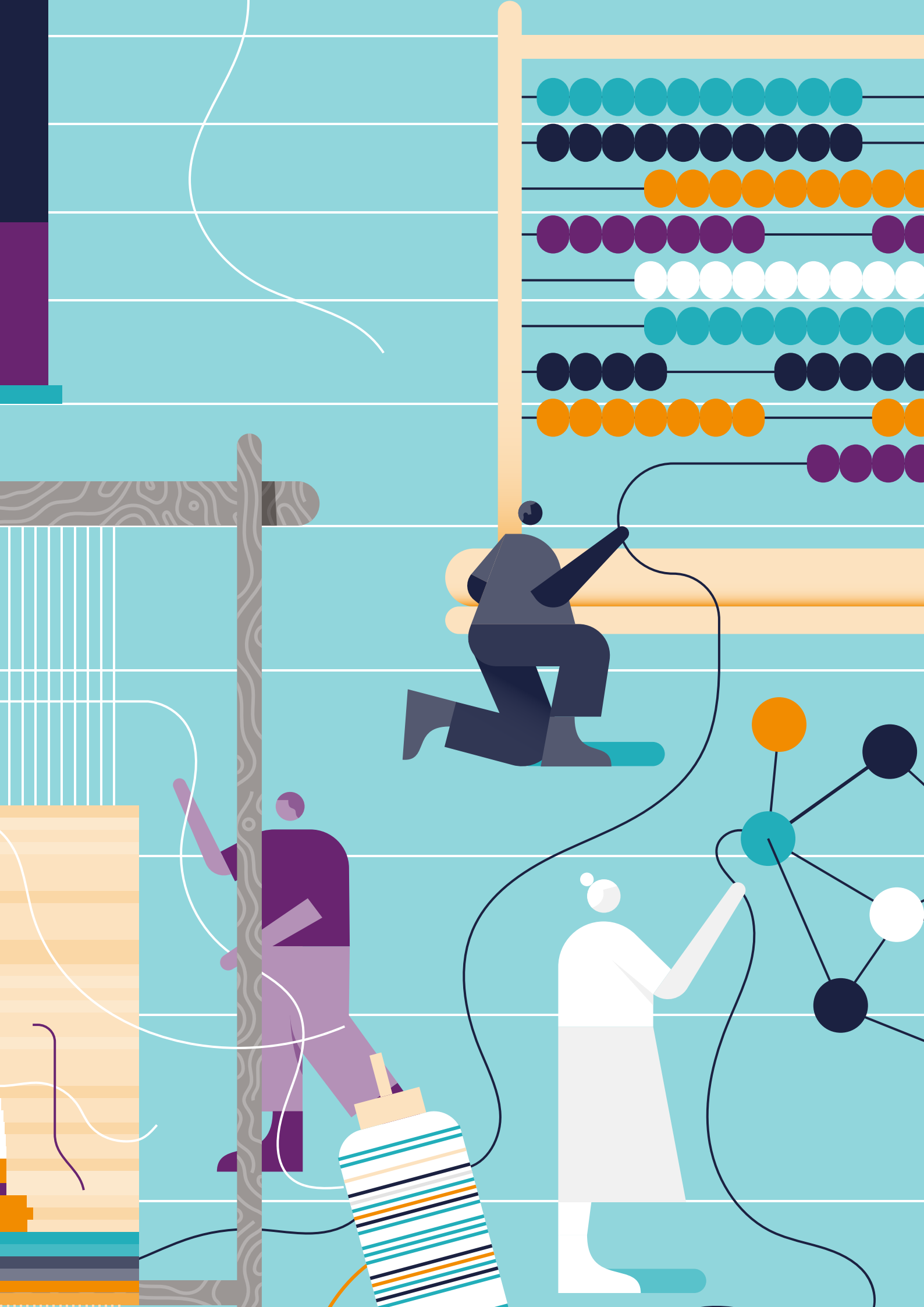
The research has shown that many university teachers are deeply committed to the principles of equity and inclusion and are dedicated to developing pedagogical processes that build students' confidence and support their learning and development. Teachers are committed to helping students understand the particular knowledge, skills and practices within the subject domain so that opportunities to develop subject capability are redistributed to students from a range of diverse backgrounds. This is vital for student equity.

However, the research has also uncovered that 'capability' itself is complex because it is often a contested concept within higher education broadly and within subject domains more specifically. Further, the discourses of capability being innate or developmental are similarly contradictory and contested, often with both notions at play simultaneously in pedagogical spaces and imaginations.

The current structures and systems in higher education that place high levels of demand and expectation on individual students and teachers are often experienced as frustrating and highly challenging. This includes the demand to meet the expectations of both 'excellence' and 'equity', which often push and pull university teachers in different and competing directions. Thus, the project reveals the need for attention to be paid more carefully to constructions of capability within and across pedagogical spaces and practices in higher education.

This requires that institutional support be provided to university teachers in developing their pedagogical practices. In particular, it is important to raise the awareness of university leaders, teachers and policy-makers about the ways that deficit discourses, assumptions and judgments about capability impact on students' levels of confidence. This will help challenge the subtle processes by which inequalities in student access, participation and success are unwittingly reproduced. However this depends on appropriate resources, time and continuing professional development to be provided to support university teachers to develop pedagogical practices that create an environment of trust, belonging and inclusion.

The project highlights the imperative that schools and universities proactively challenge stereotypes about the 'types' of students who are capable of university study. Opportunities, resources and support that enable capability, build confidence and foster belonging must be made available to students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds to build greater equity in higher education.



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Appendices



Appendix A
Student Participants (2014-2015)

Appendix B
Staff Participants (2014-2015)

Appendix A

Student Participants (2014–2015)

| Pseudonym | Focus Group or Interview | Gender | Pathway |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------|--|
| Betty | Interview | F | Gap year |
| Beverly | Focus Group 1 | F | Direct Entry * |
| Dianne | Focus Group 5 | F | Direct Entry |
| Earl | Interview | M | Direct Entry |
| Elmer | Interview | M | Direct Entry |
| Ethel | Interview | F | Direct Entry (after large gap) |
| Eugene | Interview | M | High School |
| Evelyn | Interview | F | Direct Entry |
| Frances | Interview | F | Enabling, then Biotechnology |
| Fred | Interview | M | Enabling, TAFE |
| Gertrude | Interview | F | Direct Entry |
| Glenda | Focus Group 6 | F | TAFE (2012) |
| Harold | Interview | M | 9 years work in electrical industry |
| Heather | Focus Group 3 | F | High School |
| Jane | Focus Group 5 | F | Prior Degree |
| Janet | Focus Group 3 | F | Year 10 |
| Jennifer | Focus Group 2 | F | Direct Entry |
| Joan | Focus Group 1 | F | Direct Entry |
| Joyce | Interview | F | International student (Masters degree, Newcastle Business School) |
| June | Interview | F | Prior - 2 yrs of Primary Teaching degree |
| Lawrence | Interview | M | Enabling, TAFE |
| Lillian | Interview | F | Gap year |

* Direct Entry refers to students who received the required ATAR to enter a degree program

| Program | F/T or P/T | Age | First in family to attend | Aboriginal |
|--------------------------------|------------|-----|---------------------------|------------|
| B Law/B Science | F/T | 19 | No | No |
| B Science | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| B Teaching (Early childhood) | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| B Eng (Chemical)/B Business | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| B Nursing | F/T | 19 | No | No |
| B Teaching (Primary) (Honours) | F/T | 34 | Unassigned | Yes |
| Enabling (17–20yrs) | F/T | 19 | Unsure | No |
| B Law/B Business | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| B Teaching (Science) (Honours) | F/T | 21 | Unassigned | No |
| B Eng (Civil) | F/T | 27 | Unassigned | No |
| B Law/B Social Science | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| Enabling (over 20yrs) | P/T | 27 | No | No |
| B Eng (Electrical) | F/T | 26 | No | No |
| Enabling (over 20yrs) | P/T | 42 | No | No |
| B Midwifery | F/T | 19 | No | No |
| Enabling (over 20yrs) | P/T | 44 | Yes | No |
| B Science | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| B Occupational Therapy | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| B Nursing | F/T | 28 | No | No |
| B Nursing | F/T | 30 | Unassigned | No |
| B Eng (Mechatronics) | F/T | 44 | Unassigned | No |
| B Arts/B Science | F/T | 19 | No | No |

Appendix A

Student Participants (2014–2015)

| Pseudonym | Focus Group or Interview | Gender | Pathway |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------|-----------------------|
| Lucille | Interview | F | Enabling |
| Maria | Focus Group 5 | F | International student |
| Marilyn | Focus Group 6 | F | High School (1986) |
| Martha | Interview | F | Direct Entry |
| Marvin | Interview | M | Direct Entry |
| Mildred | Interview | F | Direct Entry |
| Myrtle | Interview | F | Prior Degree |
| Patricia | Focus Group 4 | F | Year 11 |
| Pauline | Interview | F | Gap year |
| Pearl | Interview | F | Prior Degree |
| Ralph | Interview | M | Direct Entry |
| Raymond | Interview | M | Direct Entry |
| Rhonda | Focus Group 4 | F | TAFE (incomplete) |
| Robyn | Focus Group 2 | M | TAFE |
| Shirley | Interview | F | TAFE, work, Uni |
| Stanley | Interview | M | Early Direct Entry |
| Virginia | Interview | F | High School |
| Vivian | Interview | F | Enabling, TAFE |
| William | Focus Group 4 | M | TAFE (2010) |

* Direct Entry refers to students who received the required ATAR to enter a degree program

| Program | F/T or P/T | Age | First in family to attend | Aboriginal |
|--------------------------|------------|-----|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| B Law (Honours) | P/T | 37 | No | No |
| B Nursing | F/T | 25 | Yes | No |
| Enabling (over 20yrs) | P/T | 45 | Yes | No |
| B Law/B Commerce | F/T | 18 | No | N/A |
| B Eng (Civil) (Honours) | F/T | 18 | No | No |
| B Eng (Chem)/B Chemistry | F/T | 18 | Yes | No |
| B Midwifery | F/T | 45 | No | No |
| Enabling (over 20yrs) | P/T | 47 | Yes | No |
| B Law/B Commerce | F/T | 19 | No | No |
| B Nursing | F/T | 35 | No | No |
| B Commerce | F/T | 18 | Unassigned | No |
| B Commerce/B Law | F/T | 19 | No | No |
| Enabling (over 20yrs) | P/T | 46 | Unassigned | Unassigned |
| B Information Technology | P/T | 33 | No | No |
| B Nursing | F/T | 22 | Unassigned | No |
| B Eng (Civil) | F/T | 21 | No | Australian with ties as an Aboriginal |
| Enabling (17–20 yrs) | F/T | 19 | No | No |
| B Nursing | F/T | 24 | Yes | No |
| Enabling (over 20yrs) | P/T | 36 | No | No |

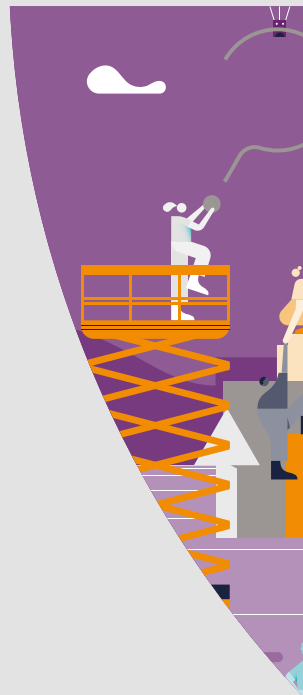
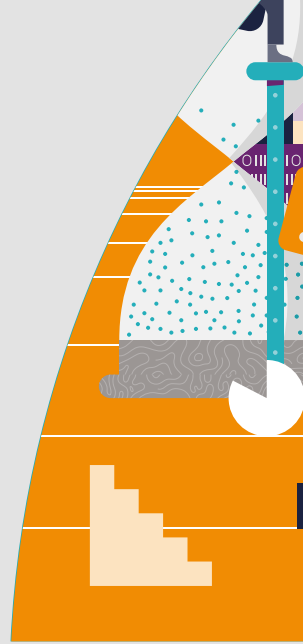
Appendix B

Staff Participants (2014–2015)

| Pseudonym | Focus Group or Interview | Discipline Area* | Gender |
|-----------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Clarence | Interview | STEM | M |
| Debra | Interview | Humanities | F |
| Denise | Interview | Health & Medicine | F |
| Doris | Focus Group 1 | Humanities | F |
| Elizabeth | Interview | Humanities | F |
| Ellie | Interview | Humanities | F |
| Gerald | Focus Group 1 | STEM | M |
| Grace | Interview | Humanities | F |
| Karen | Interview | STEM | F |
| Kenneth | Interview | STEM | M |
| Kevin | Interview | Humanities | M |
| Lois | Focus Group 2 | Business & Law | F |
| Nancy | Interview | STEM | F |
| Olivia | Interview | STEM | F |
| Oscar | Interview | Humanities | M |
| Roy | Focus Group 2 | STEM | M |
| Samuel | Interview | Humanities | M |
| Wanda | Focus Group 2 | Business & Law | F |
| Zara | Interview | STEM | F |

* STEM = Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics; HUMANITIES includes History, English, Linguistics, Philosophy, Sociology, Social Work and Education

| Permanent/Casual | Yrs Teaching |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Permanent | 20 |
| Permanent | 10 |
| Permanent | 7 |
| Contract | 8 |
| Casual | 5 |
| Permanent | 6.5 |
| Permanent | 7 |
| Permanent | 6 |
| Casual | 10 |
| Permanent | 20 |
| Permanent | 6 |
| Permanent | 10 |
| Casual | 21 |
| Permanent (probation) | 10 |
| Casual | 3 |
| Permanent | 22 |
| Permanent | 17 |
| Casual | 2 |
| Permanent | 13 |



Penny Jane Burke
Anna Bennett
Cathy Burgess
Kim Gray
Erica Southgate

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