



# Career transitions in teacher education: ‘Stories’ from three teacher educators

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## Abstract

Career transitions are often studied from the perspective of changing from one career to the next. Missing from this definition, however, is that transitions can take place within a career. In the case of teacher education and academia, these transitions are often seen as well laid out with an accepted view of ‘success’ and those taking an alternate path being viewed as ‘less successful’. In this self-study, three teacher educators at different stages of their careers were guided by the question: What are the barriers and enablers faced by teacher educators in relation to career transitions? The objective of this paper was to reconsider the notion of career transitions and trajectory. Situated within a small-scale research paradigm underpinned by interpretivism, this self-study presents an analysis of the ‘stories’ of three teacher educators and their lived experiences of career transitions within the academy. A descriptive case study approach was used to guide data collection over four phases to generate data using a narrative inquiry approach using timelines, individual portraits, collective stories and additional insights from a critical friend. The notion of critical friend was employed in two ways: the participants acted as critical friends for each other, and the fourth author challenged thinking and offered new perspectives. This self-study offers insights about the characteristics which have enabled and challenged the three teacher educators and may resonate with others, contributing to our understanding of conditions which can be created to support the intra-academy career transitions and professional development of teacher educators.

**Keywords** Career transitions · Teacher educators · Critical friend · Narrative approaches · Teacher educator

## Introduction

Career transitions in teacher education, and academia generally, often follow a very traditional and well-trodden path (Jónasson, 2016): complete initial teacher education (ITE) qualification, undertake some classroom teaching, complete your PhD and then gain

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employment as a contract or tenured university lecturer or assistant professor, depending on geographical location. At this point, an academic and research career in teacher education begins. Maintaining a career in academia involves publishing research, applying for research grants, teaching pre-service teachers, taking on administrative roles, and offering service to the education community in one form or another (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2018). Ultimately, this culminates in applying for promotion to the next stage ‘up the ladder’, which in the Australasian context is from lecturer to senior lecturer, associate professor, and eventually professor.

There is a generally accepted idea of ‘success’ in this conception of what is an academic career, in terms of what it looks like and how you achieve it (Pather & Remenyi, 2019). Those who take an alternative or less common route can be made to feel ‘less than’ in academia. Yet with recent shifts in notions of career (Heath, 2016), including the way a person is likely to shift between careers and possibly have a number of careers across their lifetime, there is a need to reconsider the format, timing, and influences on development that shape careers of teacher educators. This is especially timely given the rapidly changing contexts of higher education and lack of formal preparation for teacher educators, administrators and leaders (Butler & Yendol-Hoppey, 2024). As three teacher educators, our lived experiences progressing and transitioning through the academy raised several questions for us, such as:

- Who defines success as a teacher educator and by what standards?
- What are the pathways and transitions within a career in teacher education?
- What has driven and guided us on our career pathways?
- What barriers and enabling factors have we experienced throughout our career transitions?

These questions prompted initiation of a collaborative self-study to better understand similarities and differences in our career transitions to illuminate factors which help and hinder teacher educators’ careers within the academy. In relation to teacher education in Australia and New Zealand, expectations have changed over time in relation to measures of research impact, but also around the introduction of program and graduate standards, and the teacher shortages that have brought about a change in how teacher education is conceived and delivered (Flack et al., 2020). Teacher educators’ roles have shifted significantly, and we have experienced a shift in what is expected of us as teacher educators, yet the notion of career trajectory for teacher educators, like us, has remained fairly static.

The objective of this paper is to reconsider the notion of career transitions and trajectory via a self-study which resulted in the creation of our teacher educator ‘stories’. As we have had varied journeys into the academy and are at different career stages, we saw value in reflecting collaboratively and comparatively on our experiences. Through presenting and analysing stories of our career transitions within the academy, we aimed to answer the following question: What were the barriers and enablers faced by us, as teacher educators, in relation to our career transitions within the academy? The next section will explore the relevant literature related to this study.

## Scoping the literature

This work is situated within a significant field of research, which this literature review will seek to acknowledge and synthesise in relation to the guiding research question. Firstly, this scoping exercise will examine how the notion of 'career' is understood and the impact on the evolving nature of work on career transitions. With these insights grounding the work, we then explore how these concepts apply to higher education contexts specifically and what structures are in place to support career development in these spaces. Finally, we consider the knowledge bases that inform the tensions and triumphs associated with transitions in the field of teacher education.

## What it means to have a career

We are currently living and working in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2022). This time is characterised by changing work patterns and structures, social change, an ageing population, the rise and demise of entire industries, more automation and artificial intelligence, and the growth of the 'gig' economies. A result of these phenomena associated with the 4IR is that people are changing and transitioning careers more often than in the past, resulting in career trajectories becoming more disparate and diverse. For example, in the Australian context, while it was once commonplace to hold down one long-term job in a lifetime, a recent report from the Foundation for Young Australians [FYA], (2017) suggests that a current 15-year-old will experience 17 different jobs over five careers during their working life. In addition, recent studies from Britain and Indonesia note persistent conditions of precarity (longer spells of unemployment and activity) that young people face as they transition from school to work (Griffin et al., 2024; Pelikh & Rowe, 2024). These changing realities raise questions about how we understand the construct of 'career'.

Conceptually, a 'career' can be defined as the sequence and combinations of work-related roles that an individual occupies over their working life (Zachera et al., 2018). Taking an historical approach to youth transitions, the work of Cuervo and Wyn (2011) signalled a shift in thinking where 'traditional ambitions of 'upward mobility' in the workplace have been replaced by a 'horizontal mobility' (p. 28) thinking of 'work and career as "a journey" to be managed rather than a certain destination where one had to arrive'. (Wyn, 2004, pp.10–11) What these definitions belie, however, are the human and societal elements that influence and shape this concept. Of interest to this study is the critical lens that the work of Whitchurch et al. (2021) brings to the dichotomy inherent in the notions of the 'boundaried' and 'boundaryless' careers. A boundaried approach to career progression is very much rooted in traditional and more mainstream ideas of what it means to have a career as described in the introduction of this paper. This approach is institutionally positioned in nature with the career script providing a map that is uniform, unidirectional and predictable (Whitchurch et al., 2021). In contrast, a boundaryless career can be

considered more like a ‘portfolio’ (Whitchurch et al., 2021). A portfolio is suggestive of a cumulative gathering of experiences (both internal and external) that are not necessarily aligned to formal institutional pathways making them more transitional and explorative in nature. This boundaryless approach to making sense of a career script is more individually located and focuses on being more multidimensional in the discovery and creation of new spaces and thus better aligned with the 4IR. These notions accentuate the tensions between institutional approaches to career progression and the more non-linear nature of an individual process.

### What career transitions look like in higher education

Higher education, as a workplace, is perceived as having a particularly traditional and increasingly outdated conception of a career as being bounded or ‘linear’ (Wilson et al., 2014). Whitchurch et al. (2021) use the terminology ‘career script’ as in higher education there is a very particular script that guides progression with a fixed entry point (i.e., PhD completion) and key progression points (e.g., academic levels from associate lecturer to professor) along the way with little room for deviation. An interesting consideration, and perhaps contradiction, emerging from the work of Wilson and colleagues (2014) is that to be an academic is to be a ‘work-in-progress’ as the role is complex, dynamic, and unfinished, which in and of itself, is far from linear or scripted. This point is additionally interesting to consider in light of the ‘cyclic nature’ of the work of universities with, in essence, academics removed from the ‘real world’ work context yet preparing graduates for workplace realities (Wilson et al., 2014).

While many academics do adhere to the higher education ‘career script’, however, increasingly more academics are making non-linear moves into roles and positions within and between institutions as well as in and out of university contexts (Phan, 2018). Importantly, research from Heffernan and McKay (2019) draws attention to the notion that academic development will require a range of supports and inputs that will differ across career stages. In particular, an emergent key finding from their work included the importance of contextualising development need so that they align with what academics specifically need to carry out their duties. In supporting effective transitions, four types of support were identified by Greer and Kirk (2022) as being valued for effective transitions: emotional, appraisal, informational, and instrumental and are detailed in relation to this study in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Four type of social supports for effective transitions (House, 1981, cited in Greer & Kirk, 2022)

Support type	Example
Emotional (includes empathy, caring, love, and trust.)	Mentoring, building workplace relationships, self-efficacy, support from family and friends
Appraisal	Evaluative feedback both explicit and implicit
Informational (transmission of information)	Guidance, suggestions and advice
Instrumental (tangible help to recipients in need)	Provision of materials and resources such as money or time

Instrumental support, which was defined essentially as resourcing, was the most sought after type of support to aid career transitions, with appraisal, largely in the form of evaluative feedback, the least. Informational support in career transitioning was identified as being guidance and advice, while emotional support took the form of mentoring. Whitchurch et al. (2021) also noted the key role that mentoring had in helping academics to successfully navigate the more unorthodox career scripts. Greer and Kirk (2022) did identify that while these four support mechanisms were highly valued, their research highlighted the significant role that individuals had in their own career transitions through the maintenance and persistence of their own intrinsic motivation and internal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-management) in making and managing change.

### **What helps and hinders transitions in teacher education**

As demonstrated in the previous section, there is growing interest in the career transitions undertaken by academics, both within and outside of higher education institutions with internal and external factors playing a role in career decision-making (Arthur et al., 2005). In drilling down into one aspect of the academy, in this case, teacher education, there is evidence of a dearth of literature around transitions within the academy in this particular field (Wood & Borg, 2010). There is, however, a significant body of knowledge around career transitions from classroom teacher to a teacher educator from which insights relevant to this study can be gleaned due to the similarities in institutional context and shifting role identification (Dinkelman et al., 2006).

There is some universality around how the transition from teacher-to-teacher educator is described in the literature, which is by and large, characterised as 'complex' and 'challenging' (Dinkelman et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2012; Wood & Borg, 2010). As Wood and Borg (2010) note, this career transition requires a change in professional identity alongside a subsequent (re)alignment in both a situational and a substantial sense of self. The requirement and process to merge a former identity as a classroom teacher with a new identity as a teacher educator is certainly identified as both triumph and tension (Dinkelman et al., 2006). Dinkelman et al. (2006) note that in this career transition the institutional context and the ways in which shifts in role identification are supported (or otherwise) have an impact on how teaching identity is recast. These findings align with some of the themes emerging from extensive literature review conducted by Williams et al. (2012) but did not extend to include the development of a new personal pedagogy as a teacher educator and the need to interrogate the beliefs and values grounding one's own personal biography. These insights speak to some of the potential barriers inherent in seeking to undertake and subsequently managing career transitions within teacher education.

These elements are largely connected to the individual making the transition but could equally be applied to those, such as leaders and administrators, supporting and smoothing the way for positive and productive transitions in teacher education. Williams et al. (2012) research underscored the importance of professional learning

communities in facilitating two-way conversations and proactively supporting the career transition process within teacher education. If teacher educators are to be enticed or retained within the profession, better understanding of the role of teacher educators and how individuals can navigate career transitions into and within the academy is timely and necessary. This is particularly important given the lack of formal preparation for teacher educators (Berry, 2004), higher education administrators (Manke, 2004), and leaders (Butler & Yendol-Hoppey, 2024).

## Methodology

This self-study was situated within a small-scale research paradigm (Knight, 2002) underpinned by interpretivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) as we explored our individual experiences through stories related to our career transitions. Self-study is a research approach which facilitates the development of more informed understandings about teacher educators' practice and improved teacher education practices (Berry, 2004). The self-study methodology utilises multiple, interactive methods and recognises that learning is processed through experiences. Therefore, personal history and cultural contexts must be considered (LaBoskey, 2004). A self-study approach was utilised to better understanding the enablers and barriers that we faced as teacher educators within the context of teacher education in higher education settings (LaBoskey, 2004). Given little formal preparation exists for teacher educators (Butler & Yendol-Hoppey, 2024), findings from this study contribute valuable new knowledge to supporting teacher educators working and transitioning within the career.

The first three authors of this paper were co-researchers (see Table 2) and acted as 'critical friends' (Schuck & Russell, 2005) to promote reflexivity and allow for the discussion and checking of data (LaBoskey, 2004). The notion of critical friend was employed in two ways in this study. The first was the use of each other as critical friends during data creation, collection, and analysis to enable the challenging of our taken-for-granted assumptions and helping to reframe our experiences and practices (Schuck & Russell, 2005). The second use of a critical friend was inviting the fourth author to offer new perspectives on our thinking and data analysis, and challenge our findings, while also seeing congruence of experiences.

Within a self-study methodology, a descriptive case study approach (Merriam, 1998) was used to guide data collection, which consisted of four phases of generating data using a narrative inquiry approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry approaches underpin qualitative research in education (Parr et al., 2015) and this approach to data collection was appropriate for this study as we sought to explore our individual experiences around career transitions as teacher educators. Each of the phases is now described.

The first phase of this study was to individually produce a timeline (using the online platform, Padlet) showing various transitions throughout our careers. As we completed this process, we encouraged ourselves to add aspects to our timelines that we felt were important, including highlighting self-perceived barriers and enablers to career transitions and progressions. This process yielded three uniquely different

**Table 2** Co-researchers in this study, including background information about our careers as teacher educators

Name	Started teaching	Years as a classroom teacher	PhD conferred	Started in teacher education (sessional)	Permanent role in teacher education	Teacher education institutions worked in
Angela	2004	Three	2011	2007	2010	Four
Rebecca	2000	11	2013	2007	2012	One
Jared	2011	Nine	2019	2016	2019	Two

timelines, which we presented to each other and critically discussed to identify and distil what was salient to our narratives. The outcome of this process set the scene for the second phase.

Inspired by the work from Snow-Gerono et al. (2002), the second phase saw us each write an individual portrait to capture the discussion around the timelines we had created. While our career transitions and progressions spanned multiple years, we challenged ourselves to identify what was critical and express our story in fewer than 300 words. Similar to the first phase, this process saw us acting as critical friends as we shared and discussed our narratives, which is where the data analysis process began. Here, data was analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Bryman, 2016) to highlight recurrent themes that transcended across the individual stories. It is important to note that some themes were illuminated through the critical friend discussions of the stories, not only through written text. Themes were chosen that identified moderators which acted as either a barrier or enabler for career transition and progression. Throughout this process, it must be stressed that themes were identified individually and then critically discussed collectively to support inter-rater reliability and the trustworthiness of this work. We were surprised that given our significantly different careers, themes about these moderators from our narratives were similar.

Phase three saw us use these identified themes to create collective stories, also influenced by the work of Snow-Gerono et al. (2002). These collective stories were written individually through the lens of a particular theme and drew from each of the individual stories. Again, we challenged ourselves to be succinct and capture the essence of the theme from the stories in fewer than 500 words. A similar approach to data analysis was used for this data: an inductive approach through critical friend discussions to highlight the salient moderators that acted as barriers and enablers to transition (and again, also paying attention to the discussion as well as the written text). It is important to note that while this process illuminated these moderators for us, it also showed how some moderators can have either effect; that is, act as a barrier or an enabler, depending on the person and context they were within. The individual and collective stories are presented in the following section, which are used to inform the discussion around enablers and barriers in career transitions for teacher educators.

In phase four, the fourth author joined the research process and acted as a critical friend to provide additional insights and perspectives on our stories and identified themes. As the other authors were also the participants in this study, the fourth author was able to act as an external critical friend, taking a more objective stance in considering the findings and their implications. As a result of this positioning, the fourth author was able to develop the conclusions for this paper in relation to the guiding research question.

## Results

This section presents the findings from this study based on our collective stories. The individual portraits offer insights into our individual career journeys as teacher educators and can be accessed in Appendix 1. These stories were the source data for the emergent themes that were the basis for the creation of the collective stories, which are presented below.

### Collective stories

The individual portraits (see Appendix 1) should offer the reader a sense of what has led to the identification of three themes which are used to frame the collective stories presented in this section. The three themes that emerged from our individual portraits are *Pace and Movement*, *Achievement Orientation*, and *Challenge and Change*. While other thematic possibilities were discussed, such as building relationships and supporting others, we decided that the key focus should be our career trajectories within the academy.

### Pace and movement

Considering the pace and movement of careers led us to consider both subjective and objective career success, as we felt that these may play a determining role in this regard. Drawing on the work of Van Maanen (1977), subjective career success may be viewed as an internal evaluation of an individual's career success across dimensions determined as important to that individual. In other words, career success can be determined by an individual's aspirations which can be mediated by the value held by factors such as prioritising work life balance, financial gain, status, and job security. Whereas objective career success takes an external perspective, emphasising indicators of an individual's career situation that can be seen such as their income, occupation, level, context, mobility, and task focus (Van Maanen, 1977). An external perspective suggests that there is a shared social understanding of these indicators as having meaning that goes beyond the meaning assigned by the individual.

Our portraits indicate that we are charting our own courses based on our individual views of subjective career success and yet because we are aspiring to the same objective career success (nominally described here as becoming a professor due to our occupations as academics) this seems incongruent. While this might be a contested idea, there is a sense that our careers in the academy would progress at a reasonably similar pace and with a similar amount of movement.

In relation to pace, our portraits indicate we range from being almost propelled and moving at a cracking pace to a calm, steady jog. In between there is a pace that shifts and alters as opportunities arise and present a chance for response. There is a sense that the fast could be too fast, leaving little time to develop depth and skills. Or an inconsistent pace with many shifts and changes, could be interpreted as confusion or a lack of strategic direction responding to rather purposefully choosing what

next. Similarly with movement, our portraits range from an embrace of transience through to tranquil stillness. Once again, the in-between sees movement that shifts and alters around opportunity and need. In this case, stillness could be interpreted as complacency or laziness, while constant movement can be seen as a lack of commitment or contentment viewed as a deficit model of trajectory.

What we present are portraits of people who are satisfied with their subjective career success and are confident in the decisions they have made as being ‘the right one’, based on the right dimensions, determined at a given time and place. Hindsight may, of course, teach us all differently. While it would still be plausible to suggest that we view objective career success in a somewhat aligned manner, our portraits indicate that this objective success is nuanced in ways that do not always result in a socially shared understanding. What is socially shared is what the indicators are (context, occupation, tasks etc.), while what is sometimes not socially shared is how these indicators make sense to the individual and the impact they have on the individual over time as their career progresses.

### **Achievement orientation**

These personal portraits describe a unique narrative account of career transitions in teacher education. While the transition from a classroom teacher to a teacher educator is best described as an occupation change, the shifts experienced within higher education are more akin to position changes (Heppner et al., 1994). A key cross-cutting theme for these portraits was achievement orientation. Achievement orientation can be seen as a person’s internal tendency to want to succeed and excel, and to maintain a level and standard of quality. Through this lens, there are four important aspects that were apparent in all three stories.

Each participant describes having various leadership positions throughout their career, which includes transitions within a current position or transitions to new positions with a similar role and enhanced responsibilities. For example, Rebecca describes herself as being ‘happy to be in cruise control’ as she has held 10 leadership positions within two workplaces. While in contrast, Angela has transitioned between 14 leadership roles in nine workplaces. Even though these are different situations, it is clear that their achievement orientation has meant they have sought, and been awarded, leadership responsibilities.

Similar to holding various leadership positions, it became clear that these three participants actively sought challenges and looked for additional opportunities. For example, while he found his formative years challenging, Jared’s orientation towards achievement drove him to succeed in education and take on various opportunities at schools and universities. Or, how Angela ‘derives energy from challenges’ and is always open to new opportunities.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their views on overcoming challenges and taking on new opportunities, these three participants see themselves as life-long learners, who are always keen to develop their understanding. For instance, Rebecca acknowledges that she still has ‘much to learn’, but also views herself as ‘constantly learning and

growing'. Similarly, Jared is focused on setting goals and 'continually wanting to learn more about teaching and learning'.

While their achievement orientation has ensured successful transitions, particularly with leadership roles, these participants also acknowledge the role of mentoring in enabling their success. For instance, Angela points out that she feels fortunate to have been mentored 'by a number of inspiring leaders over her journey'. However, what is interesting through an achievement orientation lens is their altruistic focus on supporting others. For example, while her intrinsic motivation has ensured success, Rebecca is keen to support others to achieve their goals. Although these aspects indicate complex personality types, strong elements of an investigative and social personality (Holland, 1985) emerge.

### Challenge and change

These portraits are professionally positioned within a unique context on two key fronts. Firstly, the notion of what a 'career' is and what it looks like has changed markedly in the preceding few decades (Phan, 2018). Secondly, employment in the higher education sector remains largely governed by a particular 'career script' (Whitchurch et al., 2021) that sets the scene for an expected career path through the tertiary setting. As a result of these realities, an interesting tension becomes evident across the portraits in terms of the participants navigating the dichotomy between the mobility of the modern workforce and the expectations of a conservative institution. Emerging from these portraits are contemporary and diverse stories of what the career trajectory of a teacher educator might look like and in doing so opens up different ways to experiencing this particular career. Ultimately, career change is about growth and development (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019) and despite the varied career paths of the three participants, their desire for and decision-making around change is underpinned by the desire to continuously improve.

At a glance, the portraits tell three distinct stories of career change: a lot, a little, and some. A more nuanced assessment reveals that each of the participants made decisions to change an element of their career, whether that be a workplace location or taking on a different position of responsibility within their current organisation, by altering an element of a role or career life cycle (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019) every one and half to three years. This detail is important in that the growth and development sought after by career transitions can be achieved in a number of ways. For example, Angela's seemingly 'boundaryless' transitions (Whitchurch et al., 2021) across numerous sectors, workplaces and geographic locations appear in stark contrast to Rebecca's more 'boundaried' pathway (Whitchurch et al., 2021) from teacher to teacher educator. However, both participants cite 'opportunity' as significantly guiding their career decisions. For Rebecca, there has been enough career enhancing opportunities within her two workplaces to enable her to feel challenged and a sense of professional growth. While Angela has actively engaged with opportunities that provide growth through professional 'discomfort', which relies for her on more geographical and contextual mobility.

Another element of similarity tying these three portraits together are the motivations underpinning why the participants have sought professional learning and growth through career transitions. All three identified wanting to make a contribution and difference in teacher education by working actively and collaboratively to support colleagues. From this standpoint, changing roles and contexts achieves two things: (i) it provides a leadership platform from which to meaningfully enact change, and (ii) it provides a level of challenge as adaptation to a new place and/or space occurs. In achieving this outcome, the participants went about the redevelopment of a career script for teacher educators in ways that were also driven by specific personal purpose and intent. For example, emerging from the portraits were references to career change decision-making informed by maintenance of a life-work balance (Rebecca and Jared), the setting and achieving of professional goals (Jared), and experiencing the world widely and deeply (Angela). These various considerations speak to career change as being informed by a range of intersecting needs that balance personal values with professional challenge.

## Discussion

This section will explore the findings of this study and respond to the research question guiding this paper, which was about identifying the enablers and barriers to career transitions within teacher education.

### Barriers

The analysis of our collective stories revealed two key barriers to career transitions in teacher education:

- Working within traditional structures; and
- Understandings of career trajectory.

These barriers are used as subheading in the following section.

### Working with traditional structures

While the reference to higher education institutions as ‘ivory towers’ is in fact a thinly veiled criticism, it is also a phrase that speaks to academic traditions that value deep thinking and contemplation rooted in research and theory. Unfortunately, this construction has the tendency to position the academic as somewhat aloof and removed from daily realities and practicalities (Schnell & Rodríguez, 2017). And as a result, this perception positions the academy as an organisation that is largely conservative and hierarchical in nature (Schnell & Rodríguez, 2017). In unpacking this conception, it is an interesting thought experiment to overlay this lens across a subset existing within a great many universities and which informs the context of this study—teacher education.

By and large, teachers are practical, pragmatic and outcome-oriented individuals who seek to make a difference through the improvement of educational outcomes for students. They are acutely aware of the need to work as a collective to achieve their goals and generally have a willingness to 'step up' to get things done for the greater good of their school communities. Unsurprisingly, the majority of teacher educators were once teachers and the challenges faced by many in this transition into the academy are widely reported (e.g., Niklasson, 2019; Williams et al., 2012). It is against this contextual backdrop that this study surfaces teacher education as consisting of a workforce that is not only positioned within conservative organisational structures, but also one that is attuned to significantly different workplace norms and expectations.

As teacher educators we position ourselves as motivated individuals with what could be described as an orientation to high-levels of personal achievement (George & Richardson, 2019). Our individual and collective stories reveal a strong desire to learn and grow as teacher educators, but to do that in a way that brings other teacher educators and teachers along on that journey. While this world view may intrinsically connect with notions of making a difference and being a contributing member within an organisation, pragmatically in higher education contexts this speaks to career progression and movement along the academic hierarchy. Where this becomes challenging is when organisational structures and traditional understandings of the academy exist in ways that are restrictive and/or resistant to the nature and pace of this trajectory. As a result, conservatism and a misalignment with more contemporary understandings of career pathways have the potential to hamper the personal growth of teacher educators, unless they are supported or able to persist by being intrinsically motivated and drawing on internal resources (e.g., see Greer & Kirk, 2022).

## Understandings of career trajectory

Due to the traditional institutions in which teacher education exists, the career trajectory of a teacher educator is typically experienced as very linear (Mayer et al., 2011) with progression associated with promotion across academic levels (e.g., Assistant Lecturer through to Professor). This linearity in career progression for teacher educators seems to be perpetuated due to a lack of any models to the contrary. This reality is potentially heightened because, as (Mayer et al., 2011) discovered, many teacher educators 'fall into' the work of teacher education rather than making a conscious career choice to strive to work in academia. As a result, for many, teacher education is experienced as a profession that relies heavily on an individual's ability to chart their own course (Berry, 2004).

Schools of Education, and universities more generally, have a range of support mechanisms, accountability structures, and human and financial resources in place to enable teacher educators to move along the traditional career path (Thanassoulis et al., 2018). For teacher educators seeking a more non-traditional or non-linear career within the confines of the academy, however, the road of career progression

and promotion can be more ‘bumpy’, consisting of disruptions due to a lack of this level of institutional support (as detailed above for traditional trajectories) alongside diminished recognition and a dearth of role modelling (Hill & Wheat, 2017). A tension emerges here connected to the highly diversified nature of who teacher educators are, and what they are seeking to achieve in their careers (Mayer et al., 2011). Heap (2006, as cited in Kitchen, 2007) described this challenge to career progression and satisfaction for teacher educators as a direct result of being caught between the ‘ivory tower’ and the ‘field’ (Kitchen, 2007).

If we imagine career trajectory as a continuum running along the binary of linear to non-linear, the three teacher educators participating in this study certainly sit at a range of points. While our career ‘timelines’, created during the first stage of this study, could not look more dissimilar, there is a similarity in our drive to achieve, be personally challenged, and make a positive difference in our workplaces. Our career ‘scripts’ (Whitchurch et al., 2021), however, speak to the impact of considerations, such as risk-taking orientation, levels of mobility, and advice from respected mentors. In and of itself, we are paving a way forward in terms of documenting and sharing the various ways of ‘being’ a teacher educator, particularly in the Australian higher education context.

## Enablers

The analysis of our collective stories revealed two key enablers to career transitions in teacher education:

- Opportunities for risk taking; and
- Support through mentoring.

## Opportunities for risk taking

To a point, risk taking has a role within any profession and is particularly prominent and important in relation to career progression and growth (Wildermuth, 2019). In terms of career development, risk taking centres on weighing up, on balance, the probable impacts of positive and negative outcomes as a result of any given career decision (Heppner et al., 1994). Barriers that can impede individuals in taking risks that could in fact catalyse career growth, include fear, job certainty, and financial security (Half, 2019). For teacher educators, higher education institutions are structurally organised and governed by enterprise agreements that largely assure positional and financial safety. Therefore, fear of doing ‘something different’ and of the ‘unknown’ are significant drivers that undermine this sense of safety. Risk taking can, however, be reframed in the positive and assist in creating a point of difference (Half, 2019).

In her work with pre-service teachers, Pace (2019) coined the phrase ‘contained risk taking’. This construct has been defined as explicit instruction to enable the ‘careful calibration of risk’ (Pace, 2019, p. 229) as means for striking a balance

between openness and safety. While emerging from a different educational context, this notion nonetheless has some merit when considering risk taking from the perspective of career progression within teacher education. For teacher educators, being cognisant of the risks associated with position changes are important given the contextual structure within higher education institutes, such as a competitive job market, which is compounded by metrics and key performance indicators. Finding ways to navigate this systemic reality to promote career satisfaction and growth situated within the bounds of professional expectations is the balance that needs to be struck.

Our individual portraits are illustrative of career-related risk taking that is more implicit and internally motivated in nature. Our decision-making around career progression and growth was 'contained' by our personal attributes, circumstances, values, goals, and level of comfort with risk. These considerations played a significant role in shaping our risk-taking behaviours and were key determinants in the development of our career trajectories. Inherently, a range of career transition opportunities will arise within and across teacher education institutions. This research foregrounds that which becomes important when navigating career progression is recognising that some degree of risk taking is needed for success, although what 'success' looks like will differ from individual to individual. But instead of being risk averse and perceiving risk as negatively impacting a career, there is opportunity to understand and harness personal risk 'comfort levels' to elevate career satisfaction and progression.

### Support through mentoring

Definitions of mentoring are largely defined as a more experienced individual (the mentor) nurturing, guiding and essentially 'showing the ropes' to a less experienced colleague (the mentee within a particular field, organisation, or environment (Casto et al., 2005). The mentor–mentee relationship has been significantly critiqued and scrutinised in higher education (Rudick & Dannels, 2019), particularly in relation to imbalanced power dynamics and hierarchical power structures. While the literature in this field has predominantly centred on the mentoring of post-graduate students and early career academics, Beltman and Schaben (2012) identified that there is value in mentoring academics across their careers as an intentional approach to instructional improvement and professional growth. This approach is particularly important for female academics who are often dissuaded from pursuing or persisting with an academic career due a lack of support and limited integration with academic networks (Kalpazidou-Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

While a number of mentoring models exist to support the career progression of academics in higher education contexts (Halcomb, 2014), there is little published on approaches to mentoring in teacher education specifically. There are, however, lessons that can be learned and applied from these generalised settings. For example, Fitzgerald and McNamara (2021) documented and shared their learning from their

own mentor–mentee partnership, which resulted in a framework for consideration when forming mentoring dyads in higher education. Their research uncovered several key characteristics supporting the formation, maintenance, and sustenance of mentoring partnerships, such as fit, flexibility, responsiveness, and resourcing (Fitzgerald & McNamara, 2021). The importance of mentoring in supporting and enabling career progression is well documented (e.g., see Whitchurch et al., 2021) with the next step now being how this body of knowledge can be translated into outcomes.

The individual and collective stories shared through this research highlight the personal and highly individualised elements of what it means to have a career. With this in mind, it is perhaps then unsurprising that mentoring as a support mechanism plays such a pivotal role. As an approach, there is a lot of scope for mentoring to flex and mould to the needs of the individual. Though as result, there is a heavy reliance on the nature of relationship between mentor and mentee in terms of the functionality and usefulness of this partnership. Equally, our data indicates that we experienced mentoring as a two-way street, in that while being mentored, we were also acting as mentors to others. There was a sense of seeking guidance to navigate our careers, while feeling responsible for ‘passing on’ this learning to other teacher education colleagues as they progress in their careers.

## Implications and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to reconsider the notion of career transitions and trajectories for teacher educators, especially given the rapidly changing landscape of initial teacher education and the lack of formal preparation for teacher educators, leaders and administrators (Berry, 2004; Butler & Yendol-Hoppey, 2024). Teacher educators are considered central to the improvement of teacher education and schooling systems (Murray et al., 2021), yet the transitions into teacher education and within teacher education can be challenging to navigate (Izadinia, 2014). Much research has focused on transitions into the profession, mainly due to the lack of formal preparation and the need to develop a professional knowledge base for teaching teachers. Yet, over the last 20 years, intense social, political, and technological changes have brought about global challenges for education contexts, leading to increased calls for reforms of teacher education (Murray et al., 2021). These challenges highlight the need to better understand the ways in which teacher educators navigate their careers within the academy, and the impact these changes are having on their career progressions. Research on career transitions, like this study, are therefore necessary to help us better understand the ways teacher educators are able to forge successful and varied careers given the complex and dynamic education landscapes.

The research presented in this paper demonstrates an academic career being a ‘work-in-progress’; being far from linear and scripted. Finding ways to navigate the dynamic and complex system of higher education, requires individuals to be

resilient, persistent, and highly motivated. Upon reading the collective stories from Angela, Rebecca and Jared, it is clear that their individual mindsets and dispositions have been pivotal in enabling them to navigate the bumpy terrain of the academy, a similar finding to Greer and Kirk (2022). In their collective stories, there is evidence of Dewey's (1933) traits of reflective practice during the self-study, namely open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. Although diverse in nature, and navigating very different career 'terrains', the three academics showed elements of these traits, which begs the question: Is it their tendency towards the traits of reflective practice which facilitates their career transitions?

All three academics demonstrated open-mindedness as they valued working with others and drawing on multiple opinions and entertaining new ideas to tackle problems they encountered in their respective contexts. It could be this open-mindedness which saw them see risk taking as an opportunity for career progression and growth, rather than a threat to their sense of equilibrium. Each spoke about growing and learning in some form, which works best when reflecting personally and then sharing with others collaboratively. This was demonstrated through the co-creation of the collective stories. Their open-mindedness led them to create the individual portraits which they subjected to collaborative discussion and interrogation. To do this, they needed to be open to the possibility of having their assumptions challenged, which is not an easy thing to do, as it requires critical evaluation and often re-evaluation of one's beliefs and values.

Being open minded to other perspectives also required wholeheartedness. That is, being genuine and enthusiastic about discovering a solution to a problem. Although the three academics have worked in a different number of physical workplaces, a commonality is their continued desire for challenge and to be challenged within or across institutions. They demonstrated this through a willingness to step outside their comfort zone, such as, taking on board positions of leadership, and changing workplaces. With this constant change comes new possibilities but also unknown consequences. This requires wholeheartedness and responsibility to adopt the challenges and manage any uncertainty which may arise.

Although recognising the enablers and barriers, the academics have seen these as working both ways. For example, rigid workplace contexts, although challenging to navigate, provide some consistency for teacher educators, which is helpful when other aspects of their roles are less constant and therefore generate feelings of uncertainty. By being open minded, wholehearted and responsible, they are better able to see and reframe challenges as opportunities for learning. Sharing the ways they have navigated such challenges and uncertainty, by developing communities of practice (like this one and those highlighted by Williams et al. (2012)) enables the naming and framing of challengers and enablers, which, when communicated

through scholarship, support others to better navigate career journeys and transitions in higher education.

In conclusion, if we are to continue building a knowledge base for teacher education, we need to better understand how teacher educators successfully navigate the dynamic and complex landscapes in which they work. By opening their career transitions to public analysis and interrogation Angela, Rebecca and Jared have offered insights into the characteristics which have enabled and challenged them in their roles as teacher educators which may resonate with others and contributed to our understanding of conditions which can be created to support the career progression and professional development of teacher educators.

## Appendix 1

### Individual portraits

#### Portrait one—Angela

On paper, nine workplaces and experience across 14 leadership roles in a career spanning two decades may seem professionally unhinged. Instead of deficit modelling this trajectory, however, Angela prefers to consider that ‘when opportunity knocks’ that she is all ears. As someone who derives great energy from change and challenge, she has greatly valued experiencing what it means to be an educator in four discrete education-focused areas—research, schools, initial teacher education and the not-for-profit sector—across Australia and abroad. Angela has evolved her understanding of her purpose over a number of years, which can be distilled into two elements: making the most difference she can and experiencing the ‘world’ as widely and deeply as possible. Embracing transience is a key component to achieving her purpose and signals her ability to find comfort in discomfort. Angela also has a keen sense of wanting to ensure she is stretched to achieve professional growth over simply learning and therefore being action-oriented and honing a breadth of skills, perhaps to the detriment of depth, has served this particular purpose. Glass ceilings have certainly been a catalyst for change with her relative youth, in academia particularly, proving to be a hurdle due to a perceived lack of experience and presenting as an unconventional leader. In turning this perception on its head, Angela views her unassuming ways as a true strength, and that she is skilled at connecting with and meeting people where they are at, then bringing them along on change journeys in collaborative ways. She feels incredibly fortunate to have been mentored by a number of inspiring leaders over her journey but does acknowledge that an independence of spirit and a risk-taking mentality guides her in seeking out and navigating her own path.

### **Portrait two—Rebecca**

Having spent 22 years in education in only two jobs, it is perhaps apt to describe Rebecca as someone who is happy to be in cruise control. Rebecca has always been able to find opportunities for challenge and change within herself and her work context and never left a job or a role because she was unhappy, not enjoying her work, or not being challenged. Within her two jobs, Rebecca has held 10 designated leadership roles and has felt well supported by mentors and people who she felt wanted her to grow and learn and thus, has frequently felt noticed and valued. Rebecca describes herself as constantly learning and growing over time, taking her time to enjoy life and family while she learns and grows. Having said this, she also sees herself as having so much still to learn yet having lots to offer. Rebecca likes to be part of a team; she's happy to lead and happy to follow but appreciates clear instructions and actionable feedback. She is task orientated so sometimes notices that she lacks depth. She prefers a blank page or starting a task rather than adding to or doing a final edit and enjoys planning before writing or taking action. She is good at strategic thinking and big picture thinking. Rebecca likes to work with people and to support them in achieving their goals. She garners energy from supporting others and seeing them succeed.

### **Portrait three—Jared**

Wanting to help people and make a difference, along with his love of science, is what propelled Jared into the world of teaching science as a 17-year-old. As a first-generation university student, Jared found those formative years challenging but he was able to connect with those who would become mentors in years to come. Being in education for 12 years, including teaching at two secondary schools, and teaching and researching at two universities, all with leadership responsibilities, has led to comments like 'he's a man in a rush', 'you're going very fast', or 'you don't want to move around too much'. In contrast, Jared sees this career path being more about setting professional goals and achieving them. He is continually wanting to learn more about teaching and learning so he can use his knowledge and skills to support other teachers, including pre-service and early career teachers. While being goal-orientated, Jared is managing the tensions of work-life balance with his young family. Jared thrives while working under pressure and enjoys conceptualising ideas and discussion, particularly developing visual ways to represent complex relationships between concepts. Within education settings, Jared sees his key strengths as being able to build professional relationships with colleagues underscored by an altruistic worldview, resulting in many collaborative teaching and research endeavours.

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**Competing interests** The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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