



Universities' “social licence to operate”: Leadership for successful student transitions and beyond

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Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which we meet.

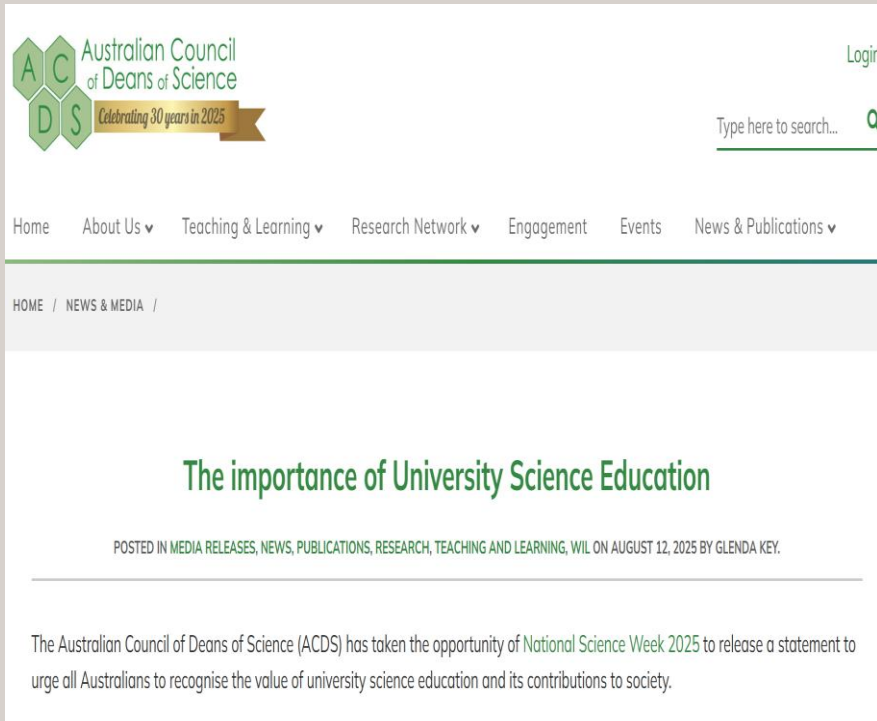
We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

*The Brisbane River pattern from A Guidance Through Time
by Casey Coolwell and Kyra Mancktelow.*



Outline



- What is a “social licence to operate” and why does it matter to universities?
- School to university transition(s): A Queensland case study
- Managing networks: The role of a “boundary spanner”
- Synthesis & Discussion

What is a “social licence to operate”?

Legitimacy

Adhering to the community's formal and informal “**rules**” including **cultural norms** and **social expectations**

Credibility

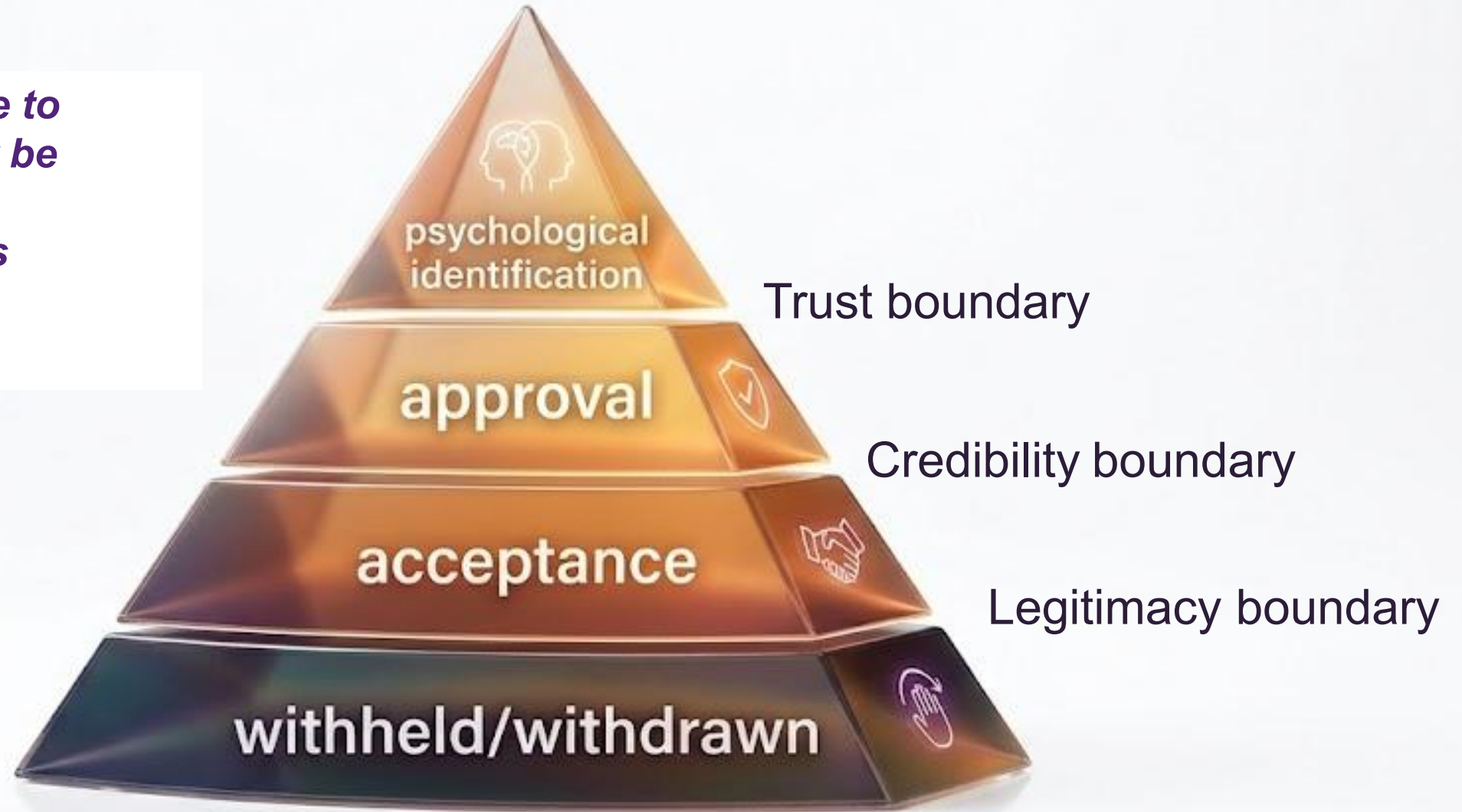
Providing **truthful, transparent information** and **fulfilling commitments** made to stakeholders

Trust

Building stakeholder **confidence** in an **organisation's actions** and motives is essential; **trust ensures viability**

These elements are foundational to generating genuine relationships and engagement

A social licence to operate cannot be claimed by an institution - it is bestowed by stakeholders



(Thomson & Boutilier, 2011)



HIGHER EDUCATION

PRELIMINARY DATA PROMISING

Domestic student numbers on rise

Privacy, safety fears cited as students reject US exchange, PhD programs

USYD rockets to the top of the world



USYD rockets to the top of the world

Engineering and Technology University of Sydney (USYD) has been named the world's largest university for the first time, according to a new report by the International Engineering Consortium.

HIGHER EDUCATION

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 26, 2025 THE AUSTRALIAN 26

Assaults, abuse, delays on list of uni complaints



Explainer: Why Social Licence Matters to Everyone in HE right now

By Tim Winter | January 31, 2025



Why does social licence suddenly matter to people working in HE?

Immigration, the housing crisis and cost of living are expected to be the some of the most significant issues in the 2025 Federal Election. Both major parties have identified universities as contributors to the social licence of the nation.

CHAOS THEORY



If Donald Trump sticks to his grand strategy, markets – and your super – could have much further to fall.

Perspective James Thomson p15

TEST OF STRATEGY

60/40 investors face tough decisions

Jonathan Shapiro p21

DOWNSIDE RISK

Equity markets could fall another 20-40 per cent

Christopher Joyce, Markets p26

Trump agenda a 'slippery slope' for unis

special innovation adviser at the University of Technology Sydney, said the... or ideological considerations. Once breached, this principle gives way to a slippery slope of the kind of anti-science prejudice and relativism that...

Investigator examines ANU leadership

Tertiary education

Ongoing acceptance and trust that students, staff, communities, governments, and the broader public grant to universities has waned.

Social Licence Steering Committee launched in Australia, 2025

“Social licence can be understood as the acceptance that is given or granted to an organisation by the community. Social licence is a challenge for universities to reckon with — from the governing body, to management, and throughout the operations of the institution...”

*It’s an ongoing consideration for individual institutions and for the broader sector to come together on - **across networks and representative groups**”.*

Initial UCC priorities...

**Student safety
and inclusion**



**Federal election
positioning**

**Workforce
reform**



**Public
communication**

**Governance
integrity**



**International
students**

Understanding transition: a QLD case study

1. *What are the drivers of a successful transition from school to university?*
2. *How do student profiles differ in their propensity to succeed?*
3. *Why does “program fit” matter?*
4. *How do students detect success?*



Funded by the QLD Department of Education

Understanding transition



Transitioning from school to university is a significant life event

Social challenges
Academic challenges
Metacognitive challenges
Environmental changes



Larger classes, longer deadlines, larger tasks with fewer checkpoints, little/no formative feedback, new/different pedagogies, harder to navigate to find help

Sudden loss
of structure



Self-regulation is critical to meeting these challenges



Transition pedagogies can promote adaptation and success

Participants: JCU & UQ

Total surveys  694

Total interviews  67

530 students



THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA

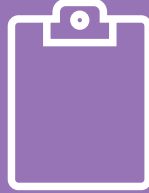
164 students



JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA



Methods: surveys and interviews



Self-Regulation for Learning Online (SRL-O) survey

- intrinsic motivation
- extrinsic motivation
- negative achievement emotion
- planning and time management
- metacognition
- effort regulation
- social support
- task strategies

Additional questions

- sense of belonging
- success
- school influence
- living arrangements
- program fit



- **30-40 min structured interviews**
- Opt-in
- Complementary data collected in interviews to provide a deeper understanding of student experiences
- Thematic analysis

Definitions for self-regulated learning

Term	Definition
<i>Intrinsic motivation</i>	Student is motivated by interest, challenge, curiosity, mastery
<i>Extrinsic motivation</i>	Student is motivated by grades, rewards, competition or evaluation by others
<i>Negative achievement emotions</i>	Student experiences negative activating (anxiety, shame) or deactivating (hopelessness, boredom) emotions when studying
<i>Planning and time management</i>	Student structures their efforts towards study using planning and time management strategies
<i>Meta-cognition</i>	Planning, monitoring and evaluating e.g. goal setting and task analysis
<i>Effort regulation</i>	The ability to persist even when the task is difficult or uninteresting
<i>Social support</i>	Willingness to seek help and collaborate with peers and teachers
<i>Task strategies</i>	Strategies that help students to connect new information with prior knowledge
<i>University sense of belonging</i>	Students feel connected at university through engagement, acceptance, contribution and inclusion
<i>Program fit</i>	Students study a program that they are intrinsically interested in and motivated to complete

Q1: Drivers of success (survey data)

	Intrinsic motivation	Extrinsic motivation	Negative achievement emotions	Planning and time management	Meta-cognition	Effort regulation	Social support	Task strategies	Sense of belonging at Uni	Program fit
Year 12 ATAR			***			***	*			*
Year 1 Sem 1 GPA	***		***	***	**	***	***		***	***

Self-regulated learning and achievement correlations

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Empty cells represent non-significant correlations

Q2. Five transition profiles emerged

(via Latent profile analysis)



Happy to be here

- Average Self-regulated learning
- Above average Belonging & Program fit
- 43% of study cohort



Transitioning well: right program

- Above average Self-regulated learning, Belonging & Program fit
- 22% of study cohort



Transitioning well: wrong program

- Above average Self-regulated learning, lowest Program fit
- 8% of study cohort



Struggling with transition: right program

- Low self-regulated learning & Belonging, but high Program fit
- 12% of study cohort



Struggling with transition: wrong program

- Low Self-regulated learning, Belonging & Program fit
- 15% of study cohort

Profile	Science Faculty	Region	School sector	ICSEA	SES	First in family	Gender
Struggling with transition - right program (12%)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Struggling with transition - wrong program (15%)	-	-	More likely for state & Catholic schools	-	More likely for low SES	-	-
Happy to be here (43%)	-	-	-	-	-	-	More likely for females
Transitioning well - wrong program (8%)	-	-	More likely for non-state schools	More likely for high ICSEA	-	-	-
Transitioning well - right program (22%)	-	-	-	-	-	-	Less likely for females

Further challenges in transition



Diversity in regions and cultures

"Sometimes I find, especially with different accents, they can be harder to understand, but it's good for recordings when you can just go back over and replay, which I find helpful."

"I moved from 8 hours away and didn't really know anyone. I had no friends that were doing the same thing as me and I found it challenging to adjust to living away from my parents."



Moving away from support systems



Multi layered life events

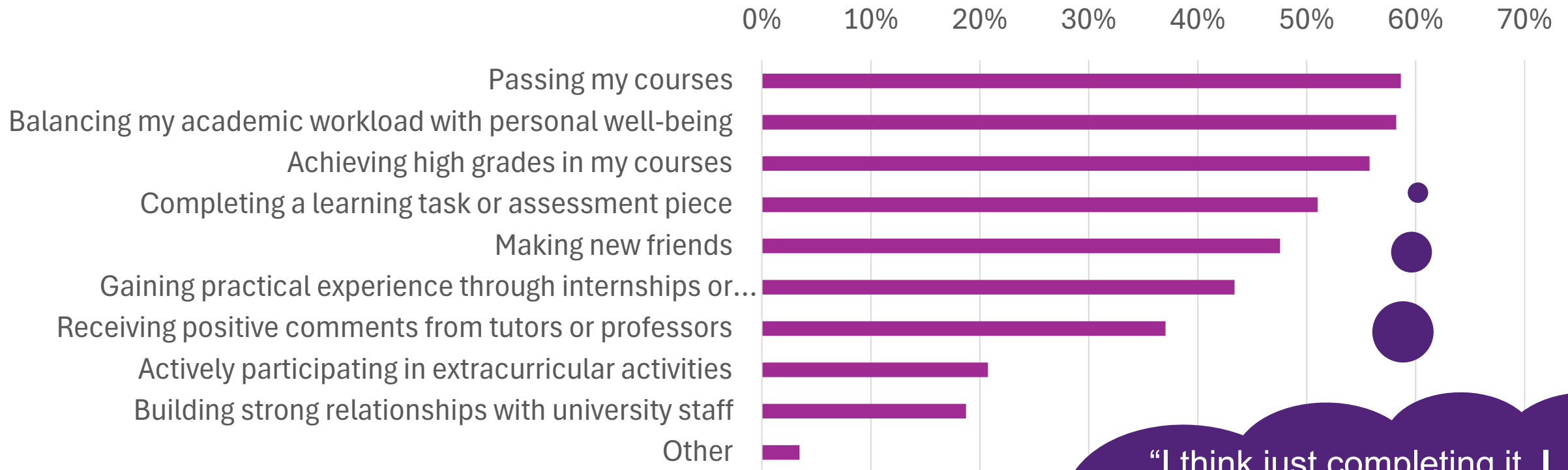
Moving city
Moving into a student residence
Learning to cook own meals

"I found that a lot of the people come from [the same school]. It's basically just a big group of people. They all kind of know each other... I joined a club, but I never showed up. Unfortunately, that one's on me."



Belonging and connection

Q4. What is “success”?



Other

- feeling confident
- improving my work ethic / studying consistently
- keeping up with commitments
- learning interesting things & retaining knowledge
- securing a job before graduating

“I think just completing it. I don't worry about grades as much now that I'm into uni. As long as I'm passing and doing a bit better than passing, I'm quite happy.”

Key messages for universities

Before

Develop **uni staff knowledge** of senior secondary curriculum, assessment and pedagogies

Build trust with families & communities

Understand **various student pathways** to university & **readiness to learn**

Where possible, **bring students “on to campus”**; assist with navigating campuses

Arrival

Demystify the language of universities

Bridge the transition gaps in **academic skills**

Facilitate **student connections** from the start (with each other in class; staff; university services, clubs, societies etc.) & monitor **well-being**

Scaffold assessment tasks to build motivation & confidence

Promote **student/graduate outcomes** to sense-check program fit

Ensure **program navigation** and **changes are simple**



Data and framework

Students Transitioning to University Framework (STUF)

Eight enabling attributes:

1. Effort regulation
2. Emotional responses to study
3. Intrinsic motivation
4. Planning and time management
5. Help-seeking
6. Adjustment
7. Sense of belonging
8. Program fit

For:
Students
Families
Schools
Universities



Managing networks - navigating “fields of practice”

*Bourdieu considered that society comprises **multiple competing, intersecting** and **hierarchically positioned fields** with their own distinctive practices.*



Fields of practice are bounded and defined by their own structures, rules, interests, values and expertise that can be isolated from, and compete with, other fields.

(Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992)

Fields of practice serve to:

attract

build

value

shape

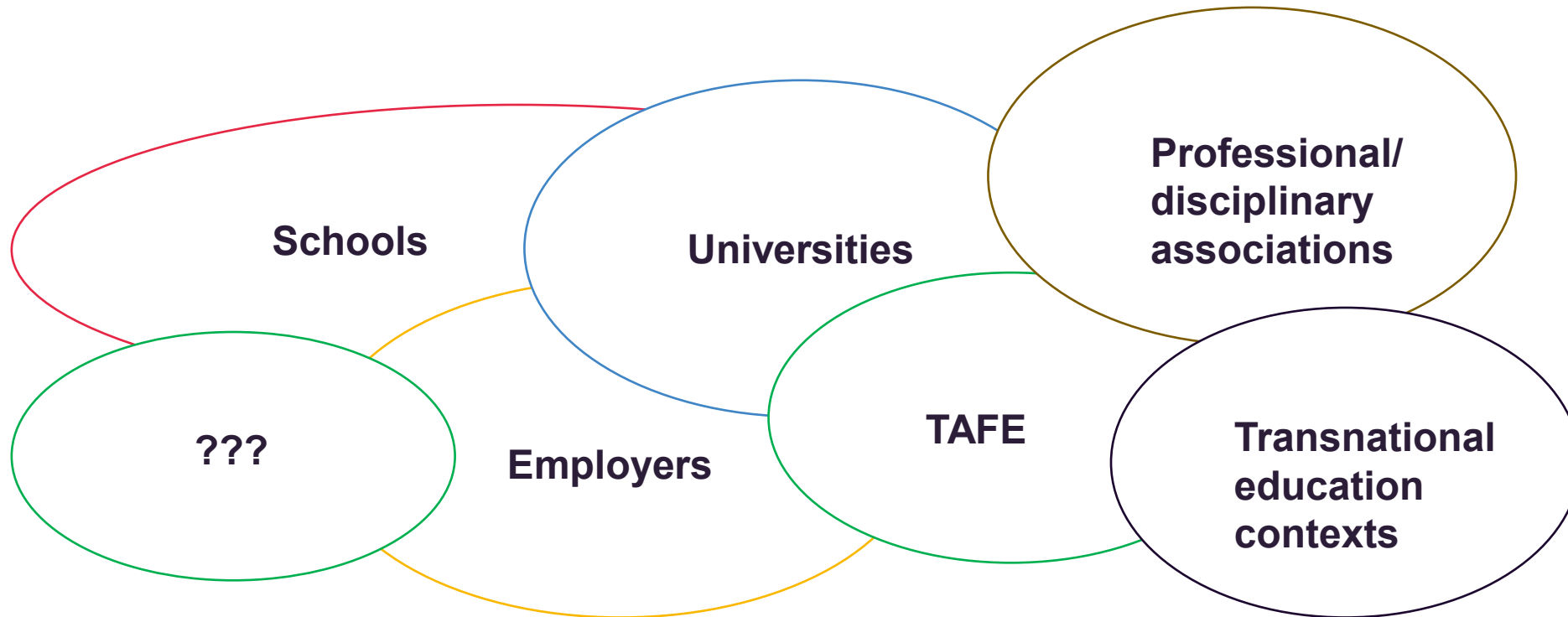
reproduce

protect

exclude

Education leaders across “fields of practice”

ADA/Es need to engage across several fields of practice



In which fields of practice are you most comfortable operating?



What is the work of boundary spanners?

Government policies are challenging traditional notions of fields of practice.

Policies that reach across fields act as **networks** and many educators, by virtue of their personal and institutional contexts, are required to **navigate the networks and representative groups in boundary spanning roles and practices.**

(Ball, 2012; Macdonald & McCuaig, 2025)



Boundary spanners "can move freely and flexibly within and between organisations and communities" (Miller, 2008, p. 622).

Boundary spanners can work as:

- networkers
- entrepreneurs/innovators
- interpreters/communicators
- organisers.

Your roles as university science leaders & social licence to operate

- ✓ Explain the **purposes of your university**; it is a **legitimate** organization in which to invest
- ✓ Demonstrate science is a **credible tertiary option** through student engagement, success, and meeting community/employer needs
- ✓ Underpin the student experience with **ethical workplace** and **governance practices**



- ✓ Foster engagement and **continuous dialogue** with students, pathway educators, employers, communities, governments etc.
- ✓ Be accountable for **safe and inclusive practices**, and equitable outcomes, within and beyond the program
- ✓ Enhance **public communication** and **partnerships to build trust** in the contributions of university science and that its **benefits are shared**

Key references (outside the Transition project materials)

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