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Transition Pedagogy Reflective Trilogy Part 2

Two Decades of Transition Pedagogy: An Integrative Framework for Conceptual Consilience

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Abstract

Two decades ago, transition pedagogy was borne out of my frustration as an educator that decades of research admiring the first-year student success "problem" had not delivered significant practical improvement for many students. Today, transition pedagogy is embraced as a pragmatic, programmatic response to students' continuous transitions across post-secondary's shape-shifting terrain. But a fresh spate of post-COVID theorising is threatening to re-widen the theory-practice gap. This second article in the *Student Success* special issue's reflective trilogy suggests that consilience – the harmonising of key success constructs to create a unified evidence-based for practice-ready implementation – is the bridge we need to build to get over success's theory-practice divide. With this consilient clarity around the "know what", transition pedagogy brings its proven capacity and theoretical pedigree to advance the "know how", also continually adapting as fresh insights emerge. As proof of concept, I offer a "student success umbrella gestalt" as a conceptual metaphor to capture the entangled nature of success's complexity.

Keywords: Transition pedagogy; first-year experience; student success; student experience; student engagement; student belonging; student transitions.

Consilience to Cut through Conceptual Complexity

In their quest for the holy grail of equitable student success in higher education (HE), proponents encounter a dizzying (dis)array of assorted and overlapping theories and constructs that offer nuanced understandings of success's complexity. These conceptual "success influencers" (#Neologism) – think student "experience", "engagement", "belonging", "transitions" and even contested notions of "success" itself – in turn draw on a bewildering assortment of fields and frameworks, including: psychology, sociology, organisational behaviour, education, anthropology, political science, economics, cultural studies, critical race theory, and more. Bodies of knowledge interrogating success and its determinants have built and shifted over the decades, constantly challenged by the latest technological, political, health, demographic or other disruptive influence. And yet, systemic barriers to success remain deeply entrenched. Shifting the success dial is hard. What seems to be missing, to borrow Wilson's (1998) term, is "consilience" – a unifying convergence of all the siloed theoretical agitating, and its many nuances, across related but disparate foci and fields. What's needed is to galvanise concerted action for impact on practice; to apply all that good thinking to good doing for the tangible benefit of students and their learning.

Consilience may be the bridge we need to build to get over success's theory-practice divide. Tinto (2016) emphasised the symbiotic imperative that "good theory and good practice go hand in hand"; the pursuit of one without its informing and (re)shaping the other is inherently self-limiting and exacerbates the pragmatism disconnect, especially in times of dynamic

change (p. 152). Amidst this volatility, success's inherent complexity is not ameliorated by calls for "more nuance" that add ever more intricate layers "by way of some additional dimension, level, or aspect" (Healy, 2017, pp. 118-119). As the National Forum in Ireland (2019) astutely observes "Success is too highly nuanced and individualised to be concisely defined. This does not prohibit it, however, from being understood and facilitated" (p. 3). Exactly!

This second article in my reflective trilogy argues the case for embracing transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009, 2015, 2025) as an actionable, integrative framework that can adeptly implement and iterate a consilient view of student success that harmonises disparate research strands for a cohesive theoretical foundation on which to base research-to-practice translation. I argue that transition pedagogy not only addresses the liminality and idiosyncrasies of students' multilayered transitionary states as they journey from here to there across HE's rugged terrain (Hughes et al, 2022), but does so flexibly and affirmatively by iteratively drawing on the rich multidisciplinary thinking into dismantling systemic barriers and advancing inclusive excellence. As Egea & McKenzie (2025) have recently reflected, the "Curriculum Principles of [transition pedagogy] have underpinned evolving adaptations to the changing higher education context, through the pandemic pivot online to hybrid learning and the new challenge of GenAI" (p. 8). Such a consilient cycle continuously refreshes transition pedagogy's evidence-based underpinnings and amplifies its pragmatic championing of progressive conditions that accommodate and respond to students' varied needs in a spirit of universal design and equity-mindedness.

Transition Pedagogy: Anchoring Concepts

In the post-COVID era, defined nationally by the Australian Universities Accord chaired by Professor Mary O'Kane AC (Department of Education, 2024), it seems trite to observe that the context and operating conditions for HE have changed substantially. But more acutely, the challenges now faced have become increasingly interconnected, demanding holism in policy and practice responses. The national doubling down on widening participation for a fairer, more equitable tertiary education system – one that accommodates greater numbers of equity-deserving students to meet future skills needs – is meshing with the global economic and social imperative to enable lifelong learning in response to "rapid technological, social, political and environmental change" (Department of Education, 2024, p. 1).

In HE today, the ethics and practice of substantive inclusion demand a fundamental re-visioning of our educational offer and its delivery. If longstanding systemic barriers to centring equity are to be dismantled, then culturally and structurally, institutionally and sector-wide, the commitment must be to mainstream inclusive excellence and join-up currently disconnected approaches that reprehensibly leave individual students responsible for their own, relatively unmediated, success. A paradigm shift is required to actuate an interactionalist and shared responsibility between students and their institutions to mutually adapt and bridge otherwise intractable "socio-cultural incongruity" (Devlin, et al., 2012, p. 8; also Kift, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2023, 2024; Zepke & Leach, 2005). If we are to do this well in scalable and sustainable ways – as we must – then coordinated and comprehensive whole-of-institution approaches are needed to assure inclusion across every touchpoint in a student's individual learning journey. To play with some of the evocative relationship-rich language emerging (Felten & Lambert, 2020), our institutions, and all actors within and communities connected to them, must embrace and universally practise "relentless inclusivity" to authentically affirm, value and support every student as they navigate the daily ups and downs of continuous transitionary states into and across university and beyond.

This is no semantic exercise. Already, approximately 50 percent of Australian HE students belong to at least one of the defined "equity groups" (Department of Education, 2024), while many belong to two or more and experience exacerbated, cumulative disadvantage that worsens student outcomes (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The same percentage again – about half – are first in their family to attend university (O'Shea, 2023). As economic inequality and social inequity intensify, student poverty and financial pressures exacerbate many students' already heavy life loads (of work and caring responsibilities), impacting both the time and resources available for study and their mental wellbeing,[1] with flow-on implications for learning success. Other factors, such as students studying part-time, being mature age or belonging to an "equity-like" population (e.g., students who have been in care or are carers, from refugee backgrounds, identify as LGBTQIA+, are veterans, prisoners and/or from single parent families) can also lead to poorer academic outcomes than more privileged peers (Department of Education, 2024; Li & Carroll, 2020).

[1] This article will use the language of [mental] "wellbeing" as defined in the UK *University Mental Health Charter* (Hughes & Spanner, 2024), which encompasses "a wider framework, of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing … optimum wellbeing is defined by the ability of an individual to fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to flourishing". Student "wellbeing" recognises that "in addition, students' engagement with academic learning is a key component of their experience and makes a significant contribution to their wellbeing" (p.15).

As Hughes and Spanner (2024) explain, equity-deserving students have not "had the opportunity to acquire the necessary social and navigational capital" to help them settle-in easily to unfamiliar environments without affirmative efforts to reduce the systemic inequities embedded in HE practices, pedagogies, structures and culture (p. 32). Care-full and tailored responses are also needed because not all equity-deserving students are equally disadvantaged across each of the four student life stages (pre-access; access; participation; and, attainment and beyond [Benett et al., 2024]), while different combinations of "disadvantage factors" are associated with poorer outcomes across the lifecycle (Tomaszewski et al., 2020, p. 11). Thus, successful transitions are hypercritical and require sympathetic mediation to *work with* students' complicated lives and their non-linear, even circuitous, learning journeys, especially so now given most learners take longer to complete and require support to pathway in and out of learning as their life circumstances dictate.

The Accord (Department of Education, 2024) identified that an expanded, more diverse sector aiming for equity parity by 2050 requires new ways of thinking and working that promote educational quality, "revised curriculum" and "advances in pedagogy" (p. 84). This "equity-mindedness" (Harden-Wolfson, 2024) demands that we lean into systemic inclusion and systematic support for the diverse majority, universally delivered via culturally appropriate, accessible, flexible and affirmative responses (p. 16). Thus, the Accord's vision to put First Nations people, equity and students at the heart of a fairer tertiary education system signals a significant, step change imperative; a quantum leap beyond pedagogical tinkering and educational business as usual (Kift, 2015). Exampling this big thinking, Raciti et al. (2017) conceptualise an inclusive institutional "place" as "space + meaning" to assure a "culturally secure 'university place' where Indigenous students can be, become and belong and where accumulated positive experiences engender engagement, optimising students' persistence and shaping their higher education outcomes and impact" (p. vii). This framing reminds us also that the facilitation of valuable lifelong learning pathways, between and across place, space, meaning, levels and providers, can be particularly non-linear, messy and disjointed. In sum, this is a multifaceted, dynamic change agenda that cannot be met with timid incrementalism; we need "actionable approaches" that are transparently available, accessible, acceptable, adaptable and accountable (Harden-Wolfson, 2024, p. 16).

The geneses of transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009, 2015, 2025) were founded in my own undergraduate student experiences and those I witnessed teaching large first-year classes (n >1100). How could equity-deserving students "be", "become" and "belong" in unfamiliar environs? Feel that they matter and would be supported to connect well and flourish *despite* bewildering HE structures and its exclusory culture? Be pervasively buoyed to persist in traversing unfamiliar institutional terrains despite the rollercoaster experience? Borne out of frustration and a need *to do* first year better, transition pedagogy was conceived to address the (then) neglected impact of students' academic and social transitions on their belonging, engagement and success. I could see students floundering. I could see the plain need to acknowledge, respect and value their entering diversity, rather than ignore or seek to subsume it. I felt students' desperate hunger to be equipped with the skills and confidence necessary to get "from here to there", as they moved through liminal states of transitional in-betweenness that left so many stranded in their early uncertainty, unknowing and ambiguity (Taylor et al., 2007). Transition pedagogy sought to confront these realities head-on: replacing exclusion with inclusion, gatekeeping with gateways, and the early culture shock of disorientation with welcoming affirmation for a navigable journey of becoming.

"Success Influencers" and Theoretical Underpinnings

From its inception, transition pedagogy embraced and surfaced the realpolitik of transition's positives *and* negatives in the inescapable rite of first-year passage. It did not eschew the attendant hard affective work of nurturing meaningful student connections, engagement and belonging for successful transition navigation. It did not – could not – ignore relevant findings from disparate fields of research. Consolidating consilient linkages into an actionable and cohesive whole, it made the evidence-based case for embedding structured support *in curriculum* to connect and settle students, peers and teachers into productive relationships early and well.

In modern HE, critical success influencers – of student experience, engagement, belonging and transitions – are all commonly at the vanguard of student success efforts. Over time and place, individual students constantly negotiate and mediate each of them, across a multiplicity of situated and shifting psychological and socio-ecological contexts and milieus. For institutions, the global widening participation agenda, COVID's great onlining, the Accord's ambitions and the rise of generative artificial intelligence, have considerably sharpened the educational quality imperative to accommodate and improve in response. COVID particularly saw many equity-deserving students, already at the margins of mainstream engagement efforts and with a lower sense of belonging, further marginalised (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2022). But this more recent transformational, rather than transactional, ethos has not always been so central. Back in the pre-transition pedagogy day, the default "student experience", such as it had been historically cobbled together, was much more likely to be fractured than holistic, *dis*serving of difference than embracing of it, and more defined by its shortcomings than its strengths.

While there has been much recent, intense interrogation of each of belonging, engagement and transitions, these segregated treatments are infrequently theorised as an "*accumulation of* experiences" for their fluid, embodied and aggregating impact on the day-to-day lived experience of student success (Raciti et al., 2017, p. vii, emphasis added). Our "quest for 'grand theory'", if there has been one, has not met with its own success (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 75; also Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Indeed, given the "inherent unpredictability of people", the fluidity of their lived experiences and the inevitable idiosyncrasy of disparate institutional settings, to paraphrase Yorke and Longden (2004), there is no one research or "methodological 'best buy' for all purposes" (p. 87). Yorke and Longden quote T. S. Eliot's *The Confidential Clerk* to observe that "there's no end to understanding a person; All one can do is understand them [and the changes that affect them] better … [so that] You can understand the change as soon as it happens; Though you couldn't have predicted it" (1962, as quoted by Yorke & Langden, p. 87).

But, at some point, all our "better understanding" needs to be actioned, holistically and at scale, with positive student effect and impact. This is not to eschew the value of ongoing theoretical work. It is obviously important to iteratively nuance and contemporise our responses to ensure resonance with the evolving needs of increasingly diverse students and communities. But continual, fragmented problem admiration without attendant, enabling consilience for transformative action can only ever take us so far. What is desperately needed now is the mobilisation of aggregated insight for tangible, system-wide advancement; an overarching consilient distillation for a coherent, integrated view that provides strategic guidance on structuring and scaling interventions with proven potential for better outcomes. Individually and collectively, with flexibility, accessibility and universality in our hearts and minds, we must translate good (even if not perfect) knowledge and understandings into effective practice that increases learning success for all. A continuous quality improvement focus ensures that the virtuous cycle of theory-to-practice-and-back-again enhancement is never lost (Tinto, 2016).

In the context of recent attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion internationally, a pragmatic, integrated approach also makes long-term sense. The more embedded and universally applied our affirmative success efforts are, the less susceptible they will be to later dismantling and carve out: sustained, deep enmeshment is hard to unpick. Decades of relentless disruption and HE turbulence similarly confirm that continued fragmentation is no way forward. Hybridity and connectivity are what's needed to respond in times of increased volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Our better HE futures must be integrated, coordinated and holistic – universally designed, sustainably enacted and bridging the gaps between learning, support and services across all institution-student touchpoints. In this climate of readiness for change, it is suggested that our "big 'increase student success' goal" (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017, p. 22) should be conceptualised as an entangled, consilient gestalt under a unifying student success umbrella, that has beneficial, daily outworking as students interact across their institution's dynamic "social-cultural ecosystem" (Zepke, 2015, p. 1311). In this way, we can make sense of, straddle and intelligently integrate, the various intricacies and interdependencies of oft-mentioned success constructs for strategic, tactical, functional and measurable enhancement. The quest for coalescing commonality across the various success influencers, in aid of such a umbrella success gestalt, will now be explored.

Looking for Common Ground Across Several "Success Influencers"

As we look towards HE's next iteration, mired in funding precarity, geopolitical uncertainty, public scepticism, deepening social and economic inequities, and technological challenges, what we *do* know is that, for individual students, atomised success influencers coalesce uniquely and holistically to support, enhance, impede and/ or confound the educational journey over the student life stages (Kift, 2009, 2015, 2023, 2024). Across a breathtaking array of studies, each of student *success*, *experience*, *belonging*, *engagement* and *transition* has been separately (but commonly) found to be: contested; under-theorised; complex; multifaceted/ multilayered; more nuanced than binary; non-linear; fluid; individually situated and enacted; and, inherently political and exclusionary. Each is a "fuzzy, shifting target with no universally accepted definition" (Kift, 2024, p. 7) – a "ubiquitous buzzword" (Gibbs, 2014) – that influences, not always positively, a variety of desirable student states including, for example: persistence, involvement and sense of purpose; learning capability; motivation, competence and confidence; self-efficacy and authenticity; the mediation of imposterism; iterative identity formation; cultural safety; mental wellbeing; connectedness and mattering; and, the ability to achieve personal goals.

Theoretical incoherence is evident when these siloed constructs inevitably overlap conceptually, despite claims to quite precisely delineate (and differentiate) aspects of complex student-university interactions. This incoherence is further compounded by their inconsistent rendering and application, for example: blurred distinctions within and between constructs; shifting objects, lenses and levels of analysis; the cataloguing of definitive indicia and/ or mechanisms, which are then applied interchangeably across constructs; and, when well-intentioned reductivism uses "one dimensional measures to capture multidimensional phenomenon" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 419). To an extent, this may be unsurprising given each construct's divergent origins, varied purposes and unintended adaptations over time. But, while each can contribute "a unique

and nuanced piece of understanding to the [student success] puzzle" (p. 426), without conceptual consilience, the proliferation of segmented nuance impedes practical advancement at the learning-teaching-support interface.

Stepping back then, perhaps the sum of our T. S. Eliot (1962) "better understanding" reduces (with unfortunate dampening effect) to this: one-size-fits-all success responses cannot dismantle entrenched inequities or the reproduction of privilege, because each success influencer is uniquely experienced by each and every student across quite distinct institutional contexts and embodied interactions. While, as Kinzie and Kuh (2017) caution, we should "resist the urge to create a single 'meta-model' for student success" that cannot accommodate the distinctiveness of difference, surely as they also posit, a "broad common framework", with built-in redundancy to self-correct, ensure flexibility and iterate for nuance, is not beyond our collective conceptualisation (pp. 25-26, citing Rendón, 2006). This is the cut-through role for conceptual consilience: a unifying, integrative convergence of siloed theoretical strands that translates the nuanced insights into actionable, equity-minded practice for scalable impact.

To illustrate how confounding the current disaggregated-though-entangled theorising has become, each of the nominated success influencers, including success itself, will now be briefly distilled and defined. For each also, the potential for transition pedagogy to offer a harmonising consilience in practical response will also be addressed. As transition pedagogy has advocated from Day 1, equitable, affirmative and inclusive education demands that *institutions assume responsibility* – strategically and tactically, culturally and structurally – to "control for the vagaries at the student-institution interface" (Kift, 2015, p. 60). This is the daily difference between diverse (unwelcomed) students struggling to adapt and fit into alien environments as non-conforming outsiders *versus* students feeling that they matter, are institutionally "seen", and that their circumstances are understood, respected and valued in a transformational and empowering "university for all" culture of progressive inclusion.

Student Success

What is meant by "student success" is continually evolving, the only certainty being that traditional binary notions (e.g., completion vs non-completion) do not capture its contemporary precarity, complexity, individuality and non-linearity (Kift, 2023, 2024; Kift, et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2021). As McIntosh and Nutt observe (2022), there is little to be gained from "trying to achieve a reductive definition" (p. 3). Particularly, what constitutes success depends significantly on who is asking, for what purpose, at what level of analysis and based on what assumptions. For example, at the macro (sector-wide) level, the focus is on accountability via national quantitative data collections and metrics. At the meso (HE provider) level, national macro metrics quantifying success are captured locally for institutional reporting, accountability and ongoing enhancement purposes, hopefully incentivised also by a shared organisational commitment to educational quality and equity. At the micro (student) level, highly individualised notions of success are evident – a "multiplicity of success" (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018) – with a focus on each student being optimally supported and empowered to recognise and realise their own academic and personal goals (p. 1073). In this sense, "success is given concrete expression by the what, why, how and when of student learning and the value, sense of belonging, sociability and self-efficacy individuals find in that learning" (Kift et al., 2021, pp. 297-298). Conceptualising expansively, Naylor et al. (2016) propose a nuanced, outcomes-based model of "several non-exclusive thresholds of increasing success" across the multiple transition points of admission, engagement, completion and postgraduation (pp. 264-265).

Accepting that any definition will likely be wanting, this article adopts the National Forum in Ireland's (2019) co-designed, "shared understanding" of success, with its underpinning tenets that emphasise the agency of each student in transitionary states, empowered by whole-of-institution approaches "driven in the classroom and curriculum" (p. 3):

> Student success optimises the learning and development opportunities for each student to recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society.
>
> To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community. (p. 3)

This formulation captures the signature features of transition pedagogy's integrative framework: a (curriculum-mediated) learning focus, enacted via whole-of-institution shared responsibility through meaningful staff-student partnerships (articles one and three). As Kinzie and Kuh (2017) observe: "An institution's total learning environment – its context and culture – matter to how student success is defined, addressed, and achieved" (p. 22).

Student Experience

While it is agreed that a positive "student experience" is important for persistence, engagement, belonging and consequent achievement and success, there is little consensus as to what that might entail. Like student success, student experience depends also on who is asking, what and why. The lived student-institution relationship over the lifecycle is (again) complex and multifaceted, especially so when students are positioned as "consumers" in a transactional education services industry driven by marketing measures of satisfaction and loyalty (Kift, 2021). A more sustaining and authentic conceptualisation is that of student "as partner", "as future professional" and/ or as "active citizen", to acknowledge "that students participate fully in their own learning and can shape their experience and institutional communities with moral purpose, agency and honed criticality" (Kift, 2021, p. 7).

Consider the breadth of experience(s) from the student's perspective. Every aspect, singly and in disparate combination, can be consequential and formative, particularly the academic and social dimensions, but also the presentation and triaging of administration, support, culture, structures and environment where inequities, othering and barriers persist (Naylor & Mifsud, 2021). Each embodied encounter is experienced divergently; in different disciplines, at different levels of study and in different transitionary spaces and places over the daily, weekly, monthly, yearly ebb and flow of student life (Kift, 2021, 2023, 2024). The cadence of the experience ecosystem – how it is managed, communicated, co-constructed and prioritised for welcome, inclusion, support and belonging – can be confusingly haphazard or reassuringly rhythmic across a plethora of physical and digital touchpoints; always vulnerable to fragmentation across institutional silos without constant vigilance. For example, for many equity-deserving students, before they even get to *do the learning*, the mechanics of the learning delivery, including the flexibility (or not) of its timetabling, structuring and accessibility, can operate to exclude and derail engagement, belonging and success. And since COVID, in a cost-of-living and cost of learning crisis, these delivery inequities have become more pronounced.

From its earliest days, transition pedagogy was clear there was no one, homogeneous, first-year experience, but rather a "dynamic multiplicity of first year 'experiences'", which evolve over time, place, structure and culture (Kift, 2008, p. 4). It was argued that early experiences could be enhanced by the proactive curation of "a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness" (Kift et al., 2010, p. 4; Kift et al., 2002; Mahoney et al., 2022), including explicitly to the external world of communities, work and future professionalism (Kift, 2009, 2015, 2019, 2023, 2024). Given the scope and distributed nature of students' multiple experiences, transition pedagogy posited curriculum as the "glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together" (Kift, 2009, p. 1, citing McInnis, 2001, p. 11).

Resonating with transition pedagogy's ethos, this article adopts the broadest definition of the student experience over the life stages – the entirety of the single instances of student-institutional interactions, together with the impact of their cumulative aggregation. The enlivening of productive lifelong learning engagement now adds a longer-term and iterative dimension to the seamless curation of experiences, as lifelong learners up- and re-skill via pathways across a broad range of diverse providers and educational offerings.

Engagement

Recently, when canvassing the contemporary complexity of "engagement", I highlighted how engagement's "changing contexts" (e.g., online, blended, collaborative, HE vs K-12, for lifelong learning) had combined with "the proliferation of, and variability within and between, typologies populated with indicia that frequently bleed into each other … [to make] the 'unique contribution of engagement less clear'" (Kift, 2024, p. 12, citing Fredricks et al., 2016, p. 5). Particularly, engagement's vexed *inter*relationship now with "belonging" should be freshly considered, given the latter's proven fragility over COVID's emergency remote teaching, and belonging's strong association with student mental wellbeing.

The contested nature of engagement as a success panacea has also become more evident as other critical interdependencies have surfaced. For example, in Australia, only relatively recently under the auspices of National Teaching Fellowships have we started to include "students as experts in their own engagement" in our expanded conceptualising (Kift, 2024, p. 13; Matthews, 2020). The explicit reciprocity of shared engagement is fuzzy: are students responsible for enacting their own engagement "of" or "by" the static university offer, which is *done to* them; or, is engagement a shared, evolving responsibility, in which universities engage "with" and "for" students in partnership with greater valuing, flexibility and empathy (Austin & Coyle, 2019; Egea & Mckenzie, 2025; Kift, 2024; Matthews, 2020)? And then, there is the puzzling invisibility of how students' continuous transitions and shifting identities impact engagement (Birbeck et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2017). Situated engagement:

> … is experienced differentially over divergent and often disjuncted timeframes as students engage in micro- and macro-transitions continuously over the learning lifecycle. The potential foci and loci of engagement are extensive and rarely dissected, occurring across multiple contexts, groups, learning experiences and social interactions. (Kift, 2024, p. 16)

Shortly put, we need to re-engage with engagement and seriously consider if traditional conceptualisations of student's behavioural, emotional and cognitive connection to their learning, founded in K-12 theorising, is fit-for-modern-day-purpose. For this article, I define engagement relatively loosely and holistically as having:

> … 'distinct yet overlapping meaning and practice perspectives' (Zepke, 2021, p. 68), rather than as a unitary conceptualisation of dimensions and atomised mechanisms. This is not to eschew engagement's nuancing but rather accepts, as Zepke does, that the individual student's lived experience of, and their engagement and interactions with, an institution's dynamic "social-cultural ecosystem" (Zepke, 2015, p. 1311) are messy, multidimensional, situational and fluid. (Kift, 2024, p. 12)

Given the dynamic ecology of engagement and its elusive rendering, I suggest that transition pedagogy can operate as an eminently practical engagement (for success) integrator (Egea & McKenzie, 2025; Kift, 2024). Building on early theorising around curriculum design to join-up engagement and belonging to accommodate student diversity (Kift et al., 2002), "engagement" is one of the six transition pedagogy curriculum principles (Kift, 2009). And the link between engagement and belonging is made explicit in the framework: "within the first year curriculum … students must be inspired, supported, and realise their sense of belonging; not only for early engagement and retention, but also as foundational for later year learning success and a lifetime of professional practice" (Kift, 2009, p. 1; also Kift, 2023, 2024; Kift & Field, 2009).

Belonging

The recent upsurge in theorising about "belonging" is testament to how greatly our traditional approaches to learning, engagement and success were found to be wanting over COVID, as students struggled in online isolation and experienced *dis*connection and *dis*engagement. Worryingly, four in ten students in one UK study said they experienced "imposter syndrome" and feelings of unbelonging, otherness, incompetence and self-blame over COVID because they did not "deserve to be at university" (Blake et al., 2022, p. 29). "Imposterism" can be exacerbated if exposure to the dominant HE culture goes unmediated and structural inequities are not explicitly called out and ameliorated, for example, by explicitly developing self-efficacy, confidence and competence (Addison et al., 2022, p. v). While building engagement has long challenged HE, "the [COVID] crisis appears to have crystallised the concept of 'belonging' as a more inclusive and affiliative framing of the idea. Many universities will be thinking hard about how to foster this sense of belonging" (WONKHE and Pearson, 2022, p. 4). Even so, like engagement, belonging is also no success panacea: "Un-belonging may be a positive, active, choice where students construct their identities in relation to their experiences" (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022, p. 1389).

Strayhorn (2018) frames "sense of belonging" in terms of thinking, feeling and doing:

> … a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior … [it] refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Resonating with transition pedagogy, Blake et al. (2022) found that the key to fostering belonging is "genuine integration between subject curricula and everything else" (p. 36). They argue for a shared responsibility centred around collective, institution-wide effort for cultural change – "building the broader learning experience *from the course out*, and integrating areas such as support, skills and careers … [thus] alleviating the frustrations of students who do not understand the silos into which their university is divided" (2022, p. 7, emphasis added).

In COVID's wake, the substantive links between success, belonging, transition and mental wellbeing have also been explicitly highlighted in recent revisions to the UK *University Mental Health Charter* (UMHC) (Hughes & Spanner, 2024; also Baik et al., 2017; Blake et al., 2022; Hughes et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). Aligning with transition pedagogy, the UMHC (Hughes & Spanner, 2024) exhorts institutions to take a "whole-university" approach to transition utilising "inclusive and scaffolded curriculum and … curriculum design that has a focus on transition pedagogy", particularly "embedding measures to support the positive transition of all students, across their provision and into the curriculum … to promote wellbeing, efficacy, academic integration and social connections" (pp. 33-34, citing Kift, 2008).

This article adopts the Strayhorn definition of belonging for "relationship-rich education" (Felten & Lambert, 2020), together with Blake et al.'s (2022) recommendations for its strategic implementation with whole-of-institution coherence and silo-breaching intent, which echo many of transition pedagogy's early calls to action. From its inception, particularly under the

auspices of the engagement curriculum principle, transition pedagogy has been concerned to proactively build "a sense of academic and social belonging" with a view, amongst other benefits, to "normalis[ing] the experience for individual commencing students and to reduce any sense of isolation and 'otherness' they might be feeling" (Kift, 2009, p. 17).

Transitions

Students experience continuous "transitions" as they move in, through and out of education in multiple, valuable, but not always linear, (path)ways. Transitions can be: micro or macro; horizontal or vertical; concurrent, disjuncted, iterative or circuitous; timebound, transient or ongoing; between sectors, providers or credential types; and, more (Birbeck et al., 2021; Kift, 2009, 2015, 2023, 2024). Many younger students also make simultaneous transitions to both independent learning *and* independent living, further compounding adjustment stress and adding to the challenges of navigating new academic and social environments (Kift, 2009; 2015). Like other constructs, student transitions are (also) complicated, fluid, multifaceted and individually experienced. The emotional and intellectual tensions of liminal, transitionary states (a wicked combination of uncertainty, ambiguity, anxiety, excitement, hope and opportunity) demand to be acknowledged and normalised, and students provided with the tools they need to move forward with confidence. This is especially so for many equity-deserving students who have not had the opportunity to acquire the navigational capital and privileged, insider knowledge of "how things work around here" and are understandably confounded when met with systems that have not been designed for them, replete with inflexible processes, attritional language, a surfeit of jargon and poor inter-service coordination.

Like belonging, student transition has also been the subject of recent, intense interrogation as yet another under-theorised, complex construct (Gale & Parker, 2012; Gravett & Winstone, 2019; Hughes et al., 2022; Hughes & Spanner, 2024; Kift, 2009, 2015, 2021, 2023, 2024; National Forum in Ireland, 2015; Wilson et al., 2022). Transition has been defined simply as students' "capabilit[ies] to navigate change", with reference to "three broad transition categories [of] induction, development, and becoming" (Gale & Parker, 2012, pp. 737, 735). Resonating with the engagement and belonging literature, "transition occurs over time and entails personal, developmental, relational, situational, societal or environmental change … Reconstruction of a valued sense of self-identity is essential to [it]" (Kralik et al., 2006, p. 327). As Taylor et al. observe (2007), the focus of this ongoing identity work morphs over the life stages: "even before enrolment, students necessarily have begun the transition to both the tertiary student identity, and their anticipated professional identity. And, like most cultural transitions, the new does not erase the former – these identities tend to co-exist" (pp. 4-5).

Such a dynamic view of transition, as an iterative process of identity shifts and self-redefinition, positions it as a "socio-psychological process of becoming, in which emotion, social connection, efficacy and wellbeing are key elements" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 88). Importantly, this framing allows for equity-deserving students, with alternative cultures and capitals (from the privileged and dominant), to be validated in maintaining their cultural origins to smooth their identity shifting with less culture shock and loss, especially when empowered to be, become and belong in an affirming institutional culture. Thus, transition can provide positive learning experiences, as each student works "to achieve a new identity based on their understandings of the 'identity resources' available in the new social and cultural [university] context, and the 'identity resources' they bring from their former location" (Taylor, et al., 2007, p. 4).

Definitionally, this article adopts the dynamic conceptualisation of continuous transitions that involve iterative, ongoing identity work and becoming over the student lifecycle. As the framework's "transition" curriculum principle originally posited (Kift, 2009): *"*The curriculum and its delivery should be designed to be consistent and explicit in assisting students' transition from their previous educational experience to the nature of learning in [HE] and learning in their discipline as part of their lifelong learning" (p. 40). Wilson et al. (2022) draw attention to the interrelationship between transition, engagement, belonging and wellbeing when they observe that "effective transition supports" for mental wellbeing relate "directly to key areas of focus in transition pedagogies – curriculum that engages learning, active and accessible learning and life support, active strategies to support a sense of belonging, and sustainable academic professional partnerships" (p. 176). So important is transition now deemed to be to "student success, confidence, belonging and wellbeing", that the revised UK UMHC (Hughes & Spanner, 2024) now includes a new principle in the 'Learn Domain' (in Theme 1 – Transition into university) proposing a positive duty on universities to "remove barriers to successful transition" and assure accessibility for all, stating that:

> To ensure that transition is positive for all students, it must be structurally embedded into every aspect of university planning and activity, and in particular into the academic curriculum as the vehicle for delivery [Kift & Nelson, 2005]. As Kift and others [Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift et al., 2010] have argued, transition must be "integrated and implemented through an intentionally designed curriculum by seamless partnerships of academic and professional staff in a whole-of-institution transformation". (pp. 32-33)

Success as an Entangled (Actionable) Gestalt

Having identified these various success influencers and attempted some definitional structure around their conceptualising and intersections, with each other and in relation to transition pedagogy, I return to my central thesis that there is no easy knowledge-to-practice translation of this morass of nuanced understandings without conceptual consilience. While each construct is obviously useful for both research and practice, with some clear points of distinction, taken together they are not at all discrete or siloed; rather, they are entangled and overlap. To consider any one in isolation from the rest defies embodied reality. They are also deeply enmeshed, intersectional and mutually reinforcing in their effects. For example, like student success, the student experience impacts on, and is impacted upon by, each of the others. A strong sense of belonging can deepen engagement, while increased engagement can strengthen belonging. Why transitions are relatively invisible in engagement and belonging theorising is unclear. The effect that each can have on student wellbeing and *a*ffect more broadly is sobering. And, the research tells us that some students make active choices *not* to belong and *not* to engage (e.g., Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Kift, 2024). These observations are not so much a critique, as an acknowledgment of the complexity of each student's lived and embodied institutional interactions.

In the end result, it appears that, according to the research, the holy grail of equitable student success all very much depends on everything! Specifically, it's unique in and to every individual student use case. But where does that leave us? Our better knowing *must* translate to better doing. Perhaps it is the case that, for practical purposes when seeking to "leverage institutional change", access to the broad concepts with shared language is enough, and the "precision of terms in the development of practice may have less consequence than in scholarly research" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 421). Perhaps also, like students themselves who, in their collective diversity can find commonality in their individual pursuit of beneficial (lifelong) learning, our grand theory of change for inclusive success should focus on areas of converging consilience – where disparate but related success influencers coalesce as they play out in the messy embodied reality of students' continuous transitionary states and shifting identity foci.

To pursue this to clear actionable effect, I argue that the primary effort across all HE actors should be directed to the one outcome universally desired by all students: success in recognising and achieving their individual academic and personal goals (National Forum in Ireland, 2019). Given the research evidence that it is entirely possible for students to be successful on their own terms *without* necessarily feeling (or wanting to feel) that they belong or are engaged (e.g., Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Kift, 2024), student success is posited as the most obvious, unifying (consilient) construct – an entangled, actionable gestalt to which transition pedagogy's conceptual framework can be systematically applied for effective and efficient theory-practice implementation. And it makes sense to do so. As Bennett et al. (2024) have recently identified, despite inclusive educational design being identified as essential for student equity "there is a *large gap in practice* and a *lack of strategy and structure* at both the national and institutional levels" to advance this crucial success intervention (p. 45, emphasis added).

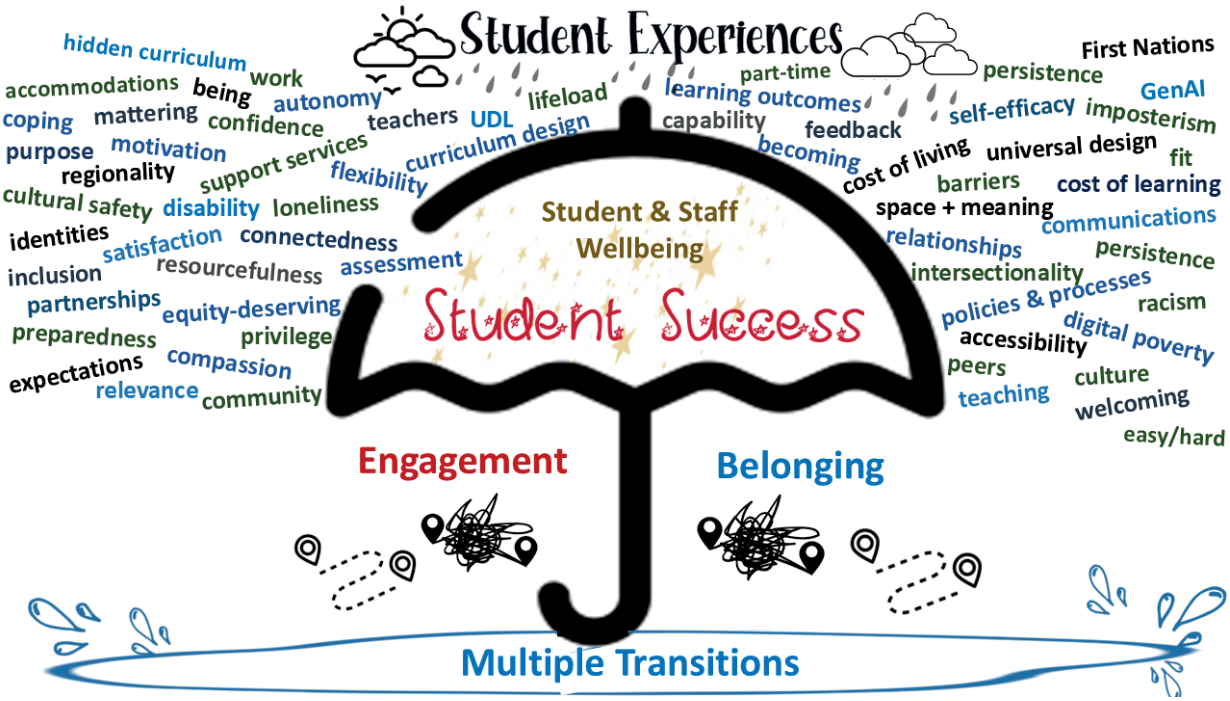
In terms of Bennett et al.'s missing "strategy and structure", transition pedagogy offers precisely the integrative solution that current complexity demands. It is a dynamic, *strategic* framework that can iteratively synthesise and translate multidisciplinary insights into a coherent, actionable *structure* (i.e., the organising device of the six curriculum principles) for effective implementation with proven positive impact (Kift, 2009, 2015, 2025). For example, Table 1 in the first article in this trilogy sets out several possibilities under each curriculum principle suggesting how current theorising might prompt a move from theory to action for better student outcomes (e.g., under transition pedagogy's "engagement" principle [how to engage and motivate students with employability pursuits or career development learning]; or, the "transition" principle [how to scaffold learning; unpack the hidden curriculum; normalise the affect of uncertain transitionary states]). The collection in that first article of transition pedagogy's many applications and adaptations, and in the review of the first decade (Kift, 2015), also identify a broad range of theory-practice translations (e.g., educating for mental health; professional development resources to engage first year learners; and, supporting student transitions across different levels of study [e.g., first to second year; transition out on completion; across postgraduate coursework]).

To be clear again, it is (of course) essential to continually seek T.S. Eliot (1962) "better understanding" of how the modern student experience plays out, the daily toll the complex work-life-study balance extracts, and how all students are uniquely affected, especially those from equity deserving backgrounds. But the priority right now must be to action the existing evidence base in a way that presages scalable, positive change. The mechanics of this "actionable approach" (Harden-Wolfson, 2024, p. 16) are twofold: first, to converge on a consilient umbrella construct of success to connect and make sense of the disparate theoretical insights in a practice-ready way; and, second, to then leverage transition pedagogy to structure the knowledge transfer across the theory–practice divide. A visual representation of the (literal) student success umbrella construct is offered in Figure 1, with the conceptual metaphor positioning success itself as the safeguarding and unifying structure. The success umbrella, with its protective overlay of student and staff wellbeing, absorbs and mediates the veritable barrage of both sunny

and ominous student experiences, protecting and nurturing engagement and belonging across the pooled tumult of continuous transitions.

Figure 1

The Student Success Umbrella Gestalt



Conclusion

Bookended by discussions that canvass transition pedagogy's genesis, its widespread adoption and adaptation, enduring validation and future development foci (the first and third articles in this special issue's trilogy), this article addresses issues around student success's theory-practice divide, and highlights the efficacy and practical utility of the framework's capacity to operationalise a consilient and integrative view of student success for impact on practice. It advocates for the harmonising of several success influencers for a cohesive, actionable evidence base in the face of a deluge of recent theoretical nuancing that threatens to overwhelm those at the student interface focused on practical impact across learning, teaching and support services. The resulting "student success umbrella gestalt" is a conceptual metaphor that seeks to capture success's complexity and embodied variability, and to underscore the need for a translation structure (such as transition pedagogy) to manage and mediate that complexity in practice. Moreover, transition pedagogy's iterative capacity to absorb and act on new theoretical insights as they emerge over time, is a further distinctive strength: amidst endemic disruption, educational quality and inclusion demand agile, in-process refinement of evidence-based responses that are attuned to students' emerging needs, changing contexts and new knowledge generation.

Building on its foundational attention to student success, experience, engagement, belonging and transitions, two decades of transition pedagogy's ventilation has highlighted the practical utility of its actionable approach as both a roadmap and a mirror; as a forward-looking blueprint that guides holistic educational transformation and, as a reflective tool that accommodates evolving complexities, lived experiences and fresh understandings. In this framing, the "equitable student success" holy grail seems much closer to attainment. Transition pedagogy paves the way for a progressive educational offer that advances opportunity for all and inclusion by design. Crucially, at this post-Accord inflection point in Australian HE, transition pedagogy's integrative framework works as the consilient bridge we need to wrangle fragmented theory into unified, actionable practice that can deliver success at scale.

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