Transition Pedagogy Reflective Trilogy Part 3

Two Decades of Transition Pedagogy: Validating Key Principles for our Education Futures

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Abstract

For two decades, transition pedagogy's integrative framework has delivered practical guidance for higher education's universal design to support diverse students in transition - proactively, affirmatively and holistically. This final article in the *Student Success* special issue's reflective trilogy will examine the framework's three signature features: its anchoring in inclusive curriculum design; its advancement of whole-of-institution approaches; and, the prescient focus on enabling academic and professional partnerships with students. Particularly, I will demonstrate how each of these interrelated foci has now been validated and mainstreamed as essential to universalising student success. Consideration will then be given to "what's next" for transition pedagogy's third decade as we face education futures of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Across the pages, the urgency of the system-wide call to action is clear. We must commit culturally and structurally to the next-gen embedding of these signature enablers if the elusive goal of equitable student success for all is to be realised.

Keywords: Transition pedagogy; curriculum design; whole-of-institution; staff-student partnerships; student success.

Transition Pedagogy's Adaptive Resilience and Uncertainty Tolerance

Since its inception under a National Senior Teaching Fellowship in the mid-2000s, transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009, 2015; Kift & Nelson, 2005) has revolutionised approaches to the first-year experience (FYE) in higher education (HE) nationally and internationally. After two decades of adoption and broader adaption to programmatic and other contexts, there is cogent evidence of the enduring influence its prescient framing has had on universal design for inclusive excellence. The framework was conceived out of a pressing need to improve how universities supported heterogeneous student cohorts transition into new, unfamiliar educational environments. It promoted a comprehensive, systemic view of the complexity of FYE navigation that eschewed ad-hoc, deficit-based malaise. Evolutionarily, it advocated for whole-of-institution coherence to enable affirming, whole-of-student development across the lifecycle stages – academically, socially, administratively, culturally, emotionally, temporally and environmentally.

As described in the [first article](#) in this special edition's trilogy, transition pedagogy strategically centres curriculum as the organising device for student engagement, belonging and success – as the in-process mediator of, not only academic self-efficacy and agency, but also a sense of purpose, connectedness, community and identity to support mental wellbeing at university (and beyond). It was argued that an integrative focus on curriculum anticipates and accommodates individual students' transitionary needs, affirmatively and universally, promoting inclusivity and accessibility from the outset of the learning journey.

Across two decades, transition pedagogy has shown an adaptive resilience in the face of HE's shifting foci, due primarily to its: substantive embrace of widening participation; support for lifelong learning transitions; and, harmonising, consilient approach to bridging the theory-practice divide (Kift 2025b article two in this trilogy). Its integrative value – for "genuine integration between subject curricula and everything else" (Blake et al., 2022) – was validated over the stress test of COVID, when the rush to emergency online teaching led to a fragmented and impoverished student experience (p. 36). It is this absorptive tolerance for uncertainty and change that commends transition pedagogy as a viable and practical solution path to achieving success by design as we look to our disrupted education futures.

This last article in the special issue's trilogy will examine the 2009 framework's three signature features and their transformation of the theory-to-practice conversation. It will trace how each of these interrelated foci – on curriculum, whole-of-institution approaches, and the enabling capacity of academic, professional and student partnerships – is now mainstreamed and accepted as critical to universalising student success. It will then look to imagine "what's next" for transition pedagogy's third decade. Across the pages, the urgency of the sector-wide call to action is apparent. We must commit to the next-gen embedding of these crucial enablers – culturally and structurally across all facets of education strategy and operations – if the elusive transformation of equitable student outcomes is ever to be realised. I argue that transition pedagogy offers both a pragmatic reflective tool *and* a forward-looking blueprint that can work to assure that student success is never left to inequitable chance.

The Mainstreaming of Transition Pedagogy's Intentional, Inclusive Curriculum Focus

> ***We all own the curriculum, and we all have a duty of care to enact it fairly, creatively and coherently.***
> *(Fellowship feedback, Kift, 2009, p. 13)*

As obvious as it might seem now, transition pedagogy's signature focus on curriculum was a significant FYE paradigm shift when first articulated. Student learning in the curriculum was centred as the locus for tackling the difficult, whole-of-institution, integration work needed to dismantle baked-in inequities that had for so long othered and excluded equity-deserving students seeking fair access, participation and success. In early sector socialisation, and still today, the framework has been particularly embraced by professional staff. For years, these good colleagues had been excluded from curriculum design; unable to influence the embedding of critical skills and literacy development, yet often the first responders when students' learning, life or wellbeing began to falter.

At the time, Gale (2009)) agreed:

> Like Kift, I too argue that the most effective site to engage in changing higher education is from the centre. Student support services are important and essential but… they are largely peripheral to the mainstream of higher education. A student equity agenda for higher education must centre on the student learning environment and experience if it is to challenge the exclusion of certain bodies and what they embody. (p. 10, quoted in Kift, 2009, p. 16)

Later, Thomas (2012) also found that effective success interventions are best situated in learning: "engagement and belonging can be nurtured throughout the institution (academic, social and professional services), but the academic sphere is of primary importance to ensure all students benefit" (p. 17). More recently, in the context of educating for mental wellbeing, Hughes et al. (2022) have observed that transition pedagogy's explicit curriculum focus on students-in-transition is essential because, simply put, "it is one of the few guaranteed points of contact between students and the university … If universities are to take mental health and wellbeing seriously, the role of the curriculum must be core to their response" (p. 3). For this reason, transition pedagogy has been influential in the theorising and practice advanced by the United Kingdom's (UK) *Education for Mental Health* work (Hughes et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022) and in revisions to the UK University Mental Health Charter (UMHC) (Hughes & Spanner, 2024).

The stress test of COVID's great onlining further highlighted curriculum's central role in carefully scaffolding and staging the early acquisition of academic literacies (UPP Foundation, 2022). Over COVID, isolated students struggled to settle in well online and particularly floundered without clear guidance on the management and organisation of their learning – the instilling of those "learning to learn skills" of *how* to learn, *where* to learn and *how* to interact with educators, peers and others. These are all matters to which transition pedagogy has consistently directed specific curriculum attention. Post-COVID, and aligned with transition pedagogy's integrative curriculum focus, Blake et al. (2022) advocated for "blurring the lines between the course and 'everything else'". They found that building back belonging for mental wellbeing "*from the course out*" was key because:

> … a lack of integration between the course and curriculum and the wider experience creates a barrier to belonging. In many institutions the course is largely detached from the wider university, creating silos that frustrate students and can hinder shared responsibility across staff. (p. 7, emphasis added)

Two particularly cogent examples of whole-of-institution curriculum transformation have been progressed and sustained over the decades since transition pedagogy first entered the HE lexicon (Kift, 2015). They are: the University of Technology Sydney's (UTS) long-standing *First and Further Year Program* (FFYE) initiative, explicitly founded on transition pedagogy (Egea, 2022; Egea & McKenzie, 2025; McKenzie & Egea, 2015); and, the implementation of Victoria University's (VU) Block Model®, which started in the dedicated, multi-disciplinary VU First Year College® and has now been expanded to all VU's HE offerings (Victoria University, 2025; Weldon & Konjarski, 2024). As McCluskey et al. (2019; also Jackson et al., 2022) explain in the context of VU's very diverse students:

> … by skilfully scaffolding Transition Pedagogy into the first year of university study, the VU Block Model is designed to provide students with the connections, cultural capital, capabilities and knowledge they require to become confident and independent learners and to work with, rather than ignore, the complexity of their lives. (McCluskey et al. 2019, p. 14)

Unfortunately, the sensible centring of curriculum to better enable student success is no done deal. In their 2023 submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel chaired by Professor Mary O'Kane AC (Department of Education, 2024a), the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA, 2023) urged that, while government funded equity initiatives for enrolled students had been successful, these interventions were:

> … often 'band aiding' underpinning issues with how institutions deliver teaching and learning – equity needs to be embedded in all institutional practices to enable every student to succeed in their chosen area of study. Universal Design for Learning, transition pedagogy, and the enablers of these approaches such as digital and physical accessibility, can assist in achieving this. (p. 8)

EPHEA (2023) went on to recommend that the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)* (HESF) *2021* be amended to specifically include Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2024) and transition pedagogy "to ensure that students can fully participate and are supported over the course of their studies" (p. 8).

To a similar effect, Bennett et al. (2024), in their latest, sector-wide impact evaluation of critical interventions that enhance equitable HE access and success, also made the case for a curriculum focus. They identified that:

> Embedding inclusive pedagogies, curriculum and support into program and course design is essential. This normalises support for all students, improving engagement, completion and success (including to employment). This is more effective than expecting students to seek out and attend extra sessions or extra-curricular support programs, which students often report lacking the time and/or confidence to engage with. Incorporating Indigenous pedagogies, knowledges and approaches is not only essential for First Nations students, but also valuable for non-First Nations students. (p. 9)

However, Bennett et al. (2024) also went on to report that, despite inclusive educational design being 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 intervention, including professional development for all staff on inclusive practice and universal design (p. 45, emphasis added).

This "large" practice-strategy-structure gap is also of concern internationally. For example, the National Forum in Ireland (2015) endorsed an integrated curricular approach as "everybody's business" but found that the "challenge of integrating professional administrative and academic support, even when it is acknowledged as good practice, is not a trivial one" (p. 16, citing Kift et al., 2010). To a similar effect, and echoing the frustration with fragmentation that inspired transition pedagogy's original development, Kinzie and Kuh (2017, p. 24) have observed that, while we "know much", what's needed is more "know how", guided by a comprehensive, integrated institutional approach that eliminates the ineffective plethora of ad hoc programs and brings stakeholders together who are "faithful to a 'know-what, know-how, and can-do' mantra" (p. 26; also Bennett et al., 2024). As Kinzie and Kuh (2017) observe:

> … much is known about the factors and conditions that affect student success. But what seems to stymie efforts to increase the numbers of students who finish what they start is that institutions for various reasons do not faithfully and effectively implement the kinds of promising policies and practices that seem to work elsewhere. (pp. 21-22)

With all these many (and expected) endorsements of the positive impact quality course design has on student success, it is difficult to understand why this is still such a work in progress. It is clearly "What Works" (Thomas, 2012) and, as the UK

UMHC (Hughes & Spanner, 2024) has recently restated, significant research confirms the importance for mental wellbeing of a "curriculum that develops learners as learners, recognising their previous learning and ensuring any and all required knowledge, understanding and skill are explicitly taught within the curriculum [Kift et al., 2010]" (p. 36). In 2025, it seems non-controversial to say out loud that transition pedagogy has not led us astray on the importance of harnessing a curriculum focus as the student experience glue to mediate transitions and learning success. We "just" need the sector-wide and institutional leadership and will to make it happen.

The Mainstreaming of Transition Pedagogy's Whole-of-Institution Maturity Approach

We are all vectors for transmitting the virus of FYE.
(Fellowship feedback, Kift, 2009, p. 11)

Another critical conceptual leap has been transition pedagogy's signature focus on whole-of-institution concerted action – the organisational maturity arm of "third generation" transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009, 2015, 2025). Essentially: "Success requires whole-of-institution approaches" (National Forum in Ireland, 2019, p. 28). The ask here is that *universities, rather than students solely*, pay "greater attention to institutional responsibility for student success" (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017, p. 19). That *institutions* self-regulate and deploy *their* organisational, relational and time management skills for a universal culture of welcome and accommodation across every touchpoint – all organisational structures and all actors, well-led and properly resourced. This is the "university for all" ethos of fairer educational conditions, with systemic barriers removed and minimal reliance on ad hoc, special adjustments (ALTITUDE Project, 2024). As Weldon (2024) puts: "If articulated and actioned clearly, such an understanding dismantles the traditional silos and barriers separating disciplines from each other and the academy itself from professional staff" (p. 59; also Blake et al., 2022). This is no small thing, which is somewhat the point.

As Gale and Parker (2012) observed "there are good reasons for institutions to take a whole-of-university approach to student transition". Those authors assessed transition pedagogy's validity against this aspiration in 2012 to find as follows:

> 'transition pedagogy': a rational and comprehensive approach to designing higher education that is:
> - Coherent (institution-wide policy, practice and governance structures);
> - Integrated (embedded across an entire institution and all of its disciplines, programs, and services);
> - Coordinated (a seamless FYE that is institution-wide, rather than separate, 'siloed' initiatives);
> - Intentional (an awareness that curriculum is what students have in common and using curriculum to influence the experience of all students);
> - Cumulative (a long-term approach to learning; gradual withdrawal of scaffolding);
> - Interconnected (curriculum principles that stand out in the research as supportive of first-year learning engagement, success, and retention); and.
> - Explicit (with links between what is taught, why, and its assessment).
>
> (pp. 740-741)

In 2014, Nelson and Clarke (2014; also National Forum in Ireland, 2015) concluded: "achieving a third generation approach – a holistic, integrated, university-wide, joined-up approach to the FYE formulated by the transition pedagogy – is challenging to implement" (p. 35). But times are changing rapidly. Just one year later, I could point to several Australian universities having adopted these whole-of-institution approaches and to an "increasing number of third generation, partnership approaches", anticipating that "such partnerships will become more commonplace, if for no other reason than because they must" (Kift, 2015, p. 66). And so it has proven to be. Legacy models of learning design and delivery have been sorely tested by: the "need to accommodate diversity and growth" (Department of Education, 2024a, p. 173); the harsh glare of COVID; staff reductions due to precarious university finances; cost-of-living and cost-of-learning pressures on students; and, the challenges of artificial intelligence (AI). The scale of the universal design challenge is now far too great for individual discipline academics or siloed organisational units to tackle in splendid isolation. If we are serious about assuring the best chance for all (Kift et al., 2021b), then shared responsibility for collaborative, cross-institutional strategies and structures is required "to work towards a system where all learners are transformatively included" (ALTITUDE Project, 2024, p. 2).

Leveraging the first decade's broad adoption and adaption, in its second decade transition pedagogy has again been flexibly applied across multiple contexts with whole-of-institution effect and universal (design) impact (e.g., Kift, 2015, 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; also 2025a, article one in this trilogy). Examples of the breadth of the framework's application include:

- To underpin "whole-university" approaches to support student wellbeing, with a particular focus on managing transitions' *a*ffect (Cage et al., 2021; Hughes & Spanner, 2024; Hughes et al., 2022; Kift, 2022a, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Wilson et al., 2022). The UK UMHC (Hughes & Spanner, 2024) is explicitly framed by reference to "the ways in

which effective whole-university approaches occur and are maintained … [which] can best be explained with reference to Kift and Nelson's theory of generational change that occurs within universities [Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift et al., 2010]" (p. 19);

- A whole-of-institution approach to foster student belonging via a *Belonging Toolkit* (Mahoney et al., 2022);
- A whole-of-institution approach to design a self-assessment tool that generates bespoke student guides to aid transition into university as the "most effective way to deliver the step-change required for sustainable transformation" (Carson et al., 2024, p. 2);
- To establish a whole-of-institution *First Year Teaching and Learning Network* to build staff capability and "promote both staff and student engagement with transition pedagogy resulting in a shift from a second generation approach towards a third generation approach to transition" (Clark et al., 2015, p. 107);
- To frame a whole-of-institution, academic-professional partnership approach to identify at-risk students for whole-of-student support, leading to an increase in contacted students' weighted average marks of 8.5 points (Cox & Naylor, 2018);
- To develop a university-wide guide to implement the FYE pillar of an institutional academic plan (University of Southern Queensland, 2020);
- Whole-of-institution curriculum transformation by harnessing transition pedagogy as a technology-enhanced learning pedagogy to foster student agency and self-regulation for diverse cohorts via co-created resources that develop academic and digital literacies (including AI use) (Pedlow & Maldon, 2024);
- To develop: an institutional *Transition Pedagogy Handbook* (Nelson et al., 2014); and, an institution-wide guide for teachers to support successful student transition into the first year, whole-of-institution curriculum enhancement and capability building (Sparks et al., 2014);
- To embed the language and ethos of transition pedagogy in the institutional *Manual of Policy and Procedures* (MoPP) (Queensland University of Technology, 2025) via a dedicated *Student Transitions and FYE Policy* that includes, for example, university-wide definitions of "First Year Student", "First Year Experience" and "Transition Pedagogy" (each defined in the MoPP *Glossary*) and a set of FYE Protocols (Queensland University of Technology, 2011);
- To develop *A manifesto for equitable and responsive student support in Australian HE* to reimagine support delivery through a whole-of-institution, ethics of care approach in response to recently legislated student support policy requirements (Baker et al., 2024); and,
- Commendation by the national regulator (TEQSA, 2020) for its framing of the maturing sector-wide use of learning analytics, referencing Naylor et al.'s (2018) finding that the "tentative, piecemeal approach to these technologies Kift observed in 2009 still appears more common than not, but many institutions are at least preparing to move towards a coherent, analytics-led 'third generation' (i.e., comprehensive, integrated, whole-of-institution) transition pedagogy" (p. 329).

The increasing trend towards holism is also evident in policy and regulation, which now embrace the efficacy of, if not the requirement for, "whole provider" (Kift, 2024b; Thomas, 2024), "whole-of-organisation" (Department of Education, 2024b) or "whole of institution" (National Forum in Ireland, 2019) strategic or reporting approaches. For example, Universities UK's (2020) sector-wide mental health framework, *Stepchange: mentally healthy universities*, exhorts a "whole university approach" that "permeates every aspect of [university] work and is embedded across all policies, cultures, curricula and practice" (2020, p. 12, citing the 2035 Vision, Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition). Similarly, in the context of widening participation, the UK's Office for Students (OfS); (2023; Kift, 2024b; Thomas, 2024), now requires that providers take a "whole provider approach", which is defined as "one in which there is alignment and consistency across the organisation to create an approach from which all students benefit, irrespective of where they are located within the provider" (OfS, 2023, pp. 14-15). More recently in the Australian context, the *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence 2025* (Cth) requires a "Whole-of-Organisation approach", which is helpfully and comprehensively defined as meaning:

> … an approach applied across all areas of a Provider's operations, including any Student Accommodation … and at all levels that is evidence-informed, uses multiple strategies and is subject to ongoing monitoring and evaluation, including in respect to:
> - leadership, culture and environment;
> - structures, norms and practices;
> - systems and infrastructure;
> - service delivery, such as curriculum, teaching and learning;
> - Policies and Procedures;
> - management and governance;
> - community engagement;

- business;
- research; and
- partnerships.

<div align="center">(p. 36)</div>

In summary, transition pedagogy's whole-of-institution approach has now been repeatedly validated as an evidence-based sector standard for universally designed HE. And for good reason. Unlike piecemeal tinkering, joined-up and coordinated effort, applied with goodwill, heart and alacrity: marshals confusing, disjuncted support services; identifies what works and is scalable; organises a cohesive offer, plugs gaps and eliminates duplication; and, intentionally orientates all structures, culture, policies and processes to serve students according to their varied needs. In times of funding precarity, this is an effective and efficient deployment of scarce institutional resources. It is coherent in its student- and staff-facing presentation, provides the data and analytics required for monitoring and evaluation and, from a risk management perspective, mitigates the inherent deficits of siloed approaches that have no line of organisational sight to assure their reach, quality and sustainability.

The Mainstreaming of Transition Pedagogy's New Ways of Working: All Staff in Partnership with Students

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The [transition pedagogy] principles rely on teamwork between staff (academic and administrative) and students.
(Fellowship feedback, Kift, 2009, p. 14)

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Transition pedagogy's third signature feature – staff-student partnerships that enable institutional holism for tangible success uplift – has been another critical step change in this pedagogical reform journey, complementing and rounding out the curriculum and whole-of-institution foci. The framework's operationalisation requires joint affirmative effort to assure success's prioritisation, in a culture of "inclusive excellence" through "equity-mindedness" (Harden-Wolfson, 2024, p. 16). Its relational, co-design ethos, that promotes students as experts in their own learning partnering with academic and professional staff, enhances outcomes for all students-in-transition and builds shared knowledge, understanding, respect and ownership (Kift, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2021, 2022b; Matthews, 2020; National Forum in Ireland, 2019). This allows an institution's distributed efforts to be comprehensively coordinated and intentionally directed toward benefiting every student based on a rationale of collective responsibility; an "everybody's business" approach to success and inclusion (Kift, 2008). This was, and still is, a big idea with powerful, success-changing, potential. As Kinzie and Kuh (2017) later suggested: "The proverbial village is needed to help a student succeed. One's family, home community, K–12 teachers, as well as everyone on the [university] campus…" (p. 22).

Transition pedagogy was an early mover in articulating and enabling a communal ethos for student success that leveraged integrated expertise and new ways of cross-institutional working (Kift, 2009; Mawad, 2009; also Egea & McKenzie, 2025; Hughes et al., 2022). Back in 2009, I acknowledged the "changing nature of academic work [and] the diffusion and blurring of institutional roles … [that is driven by the need] to make best use of the skills of all university staff – academic, professional and sessional" (2009, p. 13). I wrote then that "nowhere is the 'convergence of academic and non-academic work' probably more vital 'to the 'real' work of the university'… than in the critical first year" (Kift, 2009, p. 13, citing Coaldrake & Steadman, 1999, 15-16; also Cox & Naylor, 2018). Presciently, in ways that resonate today with good practice in the post-COVID university, transition pedagogy's development over 2006-2009 modelled a more dynamic and agile way of working that prioritised partnerships in two key respects: first, engaging with students as partners – barely nascent in Australia in 2006; and, secondly, by valuing integrated practice. The National Fellowship's large global design team of over 30 colleagues (including expert advisors, Professors Vincent Tinto and Mantz Yorke) illustrated the power of collaborative endeavour for institutional transformation – academic (including sessional) and professional staff engaging in co-design and problem solving with students (Kift, 2009; Mawad, 2009). This (then) pioneering relationship-based approach, which was also a hallmark of the Fellowship's iterative sector-wide consultation, is now settled, accepted and expected good practice. For example, viewing "the objectives of transition through the lens of a partnership with students" is critical if "institution, staff and student[s are] working together to define, plan for and achieve success" (Austin & Coyle, 2019, p. 3). In the modern university, authentic staff-student partnerships have proven impact in enabling substantive equity, accessibility, flexibility and inclusion (Austin & Coyle, 2019; Kift, 2022b; Matthews, 2020).

Particularly prominent in the framework's development were the silo-breaking "integrated practitioners", who are now routinely embraced in the organisational "third space" to wrangle whole-of-institution complexity, "lead[ing] to more effective student success outcomes" (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022, p. 1). In 2009, my National Fellowship's expert commentaries (Kift, 2009) were primarily written by these third space professionals, who went on to work with such great, collaborative effect in triaging COVID responses (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022; Kift, 2022b; Kift et al., 2021a). As the Fellowship envisioned, integrated practice now sits at the heart of progressive HE. Today, third space professionals regularly assist teaching staff to make sense

of, and respond accommodatingly to, the demands of changing contexts and diverse students' needs, particularly as we work to build back belonging post-COVID (Blake et al., 2022; WONKHE & Pearson, 2022). In this workforce model, "staff wellbeing [benefits] by spreading the creative load and providing staff with a sense of community and team purpose" (Hughes et al., 2022, p. 24). Taking this one step further from the perspective of the European FYE Conference, Carey et al. (2024) describe the transformative potential of a "third space development community" to enable institutional *and* sector-wide inclusive success (p. 128).

In the context of developing the innovative VU Block Model®, Weldon (2024) reflected on his experience of being an academic "team player" in transition pedagogy-inspired curriculum design, observing that course design became "easier" and that, "rather than focusing purely on content, we began to craft units that addressed the entirety of the student experience" (pp. 60-61). Such a collective outworking gives concrete expression to the simple philosophy that lay behind transition pedagogy's call to reimagine better, integrated ways of working. The intent was to harness an institution's distributed expertise in universal curriculum design that prioritised inclusion, empowered student learning, built belonging and mattering, and signposted pathways for successful transition navigation (Kift, 2008). From its earliest days, one of transition pedagogy's underpinning imperatives was "to get the context [culture, structures and systems] right for staff, to get the context [educational conditions] right for students" (Hunt, 2009, quoted in Kift, 2015, p. 59). This is about getting our institutional act together; in this configuration, we do the including and supporting by default, valuing diversity and embracing strengths-based approaches. Echoing Weldon, Hughes et al. (2022) similarly observe that it is "easier" to achieve this through curriculum design "if the design process is genuinely collaborative, involving colleagues from across the university" (p. 90):

> As Kift has argued [2015], 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'. As the glue that binds student experience together, the curriculum must be the central vehicle through which all crucial interventions, guidance and information is delivered. This requires whole university collaboration in curriculum design and delivery. (pp. 89)

In socialising this deep partnership approach across the sector over the years, I have used the visual aid of having all parties seated at "Transition pedagogy's curriculum (re)design table" for coordinated, comprehensive action via mutual support and shared language, goals, vision and purpose (Kift, 2023, p. 140, Figure 10.1; also Egea & McKenzie, 2025). As explained by Hughes et al. (2022):

> Kift's Curriculum Design Table… provides a broad example of who could be involved in curriculum design. Alongside academic teams, learning experts and librarians, it also proposes the inclusion of student services staff and disability and inclusion experts. This would ensure that informed voices can ensure that mental health, wellbeing and the needs of all students are considered at the earliest stage of conception. (p. 24)

Reflecting back over two decades of partnership endeavour for transition pedagogy, it is immensely satisfying to observe that, although challenging, this signature feature has also held true: "Success can only be facilitated through meaningful partnership and engagement between students, staff and the wider community" (National Forum in Ireland, 2019, p. 3). Success is truly everybody's business to advance with a seat for everybody at the table: "To assure individualised student success for diverse cohorts in the post-pandemic university, institutions and ways of working must transform and become more relational, permeable and agile" (Kift, 2022b, p. 59).

Towards Another Decade: What's Next for Transition Pedagogy?

This review trilogy has canvassed how transition pedagogy, with its robust framework and proven adaptability, has played an influential role in shaping a more inclusive, responsive, and equitable HE for all learners. Its consilient capacity to implement and advance the harmonisation of disparate research insights (second article in this trilogy), and the extent to which its signature features have been substantiated and embraced as good practice nationally and internationally, position it well to continue to shape our sector's education futures. Particularly, its specific focus on supporting students-in-transition, with curriculum harnessed as the central axis and success throughline, cements its practical utility as an "essential" inclusive pedagogy to bridge the current "large gap in practice" that is stymieing critical success interventions more broadly (Bennett et al., 2024, pp. 9, 45).

In terms of what's next, as has always be the case, complacency is not an option (Kift, 2015). At the present time, when the advancement of diversity, equity and inclusion is so inconceivably under threat in another major democracy, we must ensure that our equity-mindedness, and its institutional outworking in universal design, is *so* enmeshed in core business, curriculum especially, that it cannot be easily unpicked. Distributed learning leadership will be key to meeting this challenge; a patient capital building enterprise on which our institutions and sector will depend to collectively face down attempts to wind back

hard-won gains. Socialising the narrative of inclusive excellence and investing in capability development that builds empathy for, and understanding of, the rationale and tenets of universal design (and transition pedagogy as an example of it) should be priorities. This is literally everybody's business: academic and professional staff; university leadership and Council/ Senate members; adjacent industry-based learning facilitators; accreditation and discipline peak bodies; students past and present; and, (obviously) government. Knowledge and understanding will breed the vigilance necessary to guard against slipping back into (old) siloed ways of working, thinking and practising that diffuse effort and dilute its efficacy for students most in need. Knowledge and understanding will also activate the equity guardianship needed to bring an inclusive lens to every action, interaction and decision made: who's included?; who's excluded?

There are many areas that have been touched on in this review trilogy that deserve dedicated, systems-wide attention as we move into the framework's next decade. As the Accord Panel identified (Department of Education, 2024a, p. 254, Recommendation 36), there is an urgent need to develop "a fit-for-purpose, integrated and timely tertiary education data capability which can be used to understand problems, answer difficult policy questions, identify emerging issues, and monitor long term student outcomes"; we need to "understand and address more granular indicators of disadvantage better" (p. 117). The regulation of and processes for data collection, its management, governance and ethical, transparent use, are major issues that demand immediate attention across a rapidly changing legal and policy landscape (Stephensen, 2024).

We have lessons to learn from the UK's whole-sector approach to mental health and wellbeing (Kift, 2022a; Universities UK, 2020) and from the comprehensiveness of the UK UMHC (Hughes & Spanner, 2024), which has a dedicated focus on learning and teaching, transition and progression in Domain 1 (Learn), and is inclusive of both students *and* staff. As Wang (2024) argues, a "students-first ethos" cannot come at the cost of staff: it is just as important for our sustainable education futures to position "education as an educators-first issue too, with the hope of supporting their full humanity as they deliver on their students-first promise by maintaining the highest levels of care for students – and themselves" (p. 28).

Assessment continues to pose particular challenges. As a sector, we are fortunate to have many excellent researchers globally doing the hard work on: assessment and feedback literacies; assessment for inclusion; evaluative judgement; authentic assessment; the toll of assessment on student mental wellbeing; assessment security; and, digital assessment. As HE gears up (finally) to embrace programmatic and/ or program-level assessment in response particularly to the challenges of AI (Lodge et al., 2025), it is hoped that the specific issue of first-year assessment might arise for detailed consideration (Kift, 2024c). What is first-year assessment's role in a programmatic or program-level assessment approach? What does well-designed, well-managed, well-aligned and inclusive first-year assessment look like? What is the first-year balance between assessment "for", "as" and "of" learning; for example, should first-year assessment emphasise the "for" and "as" to induct students into HE and disciplinary assessment expectations and modes, while building student self-efficacy and confidence? There are opportunities here ripe for some big, bold thinking.

The problem of why it has been so hard to get traction on advancing inclusive educational design, when it is acknowledged as an equity-minded essential (Bennett et al., 2024), demands serious attention. My suggestion is that the HESF needs to be amended to include specific regulatory reference to UDL and/ or transition pedagogy (#Conflict) to get critical focus and traction on the issue as EPHEA (2023) recommended. Without a regulatory mandate, there seems to be little incentive to enhance learning and teaching quality in Australian HE, to the extent required for it to be fit-for-equity-purpose in an expanded, diversified tertiary system. The frustration expressed by the Productivity Commissioner, set out in the Accord report with reference to "laggards", is sadly warranted (Department of Education, 2024a, p. 180). This must change.

Transition Pedagogy in the Age of AI

As many experts (of whom I am not one) have said, AI offers as many opportunities for HE as it poses risks and challenges. Learning is profoundly social and human; AI has potential for enhancement not replacement. On this basis then for transition pedagogy, there are two specific opportunities for the advancement of student learning, if AI's rapid development can be managed responsibly, ethically and equitably, with respect for Indigenous data sovereignty.

The first is AI's potential to deliver supplementary high-quality, personalised academic support for sense-making and feedback, and for adaptive learning experiences to be curated by appropriately trained (and constrained) AI-powered "tutor bots" or "learning agents". It is acknowledged that AI "tutoring" is transactional rather than relationship-rich (Felten & Lambert, 2020) and will require its own capability development, including for students' self- and co-regulation. Even so, augmented possibilities could include using AI to: expose the hidden curriculum and obfuscating HE jargon, norms, expectations and processes; scaffold the acquisition of learning-how-to-learn skills and literacies, with clear guidance on appropriate AI use; free-up precious in-class time for more relational interactions; provide tailored career development

learning, employability and employ*ment* advising; and, enable equitable access to AI-generated experiential and/ or simulated work-based learning scenarios.

The second opportunity, at the intersection of AI and learning analytics, is the enhanced capacity to harness better integrated, real-time institutional data to deliver proactive and scalable personalised support, tailored to diverse students' varied needs. This could include: targeted and timely learning interventions; quality course advising; 24/7 assistance to navigate and manage learning administration; and, connection to learning communities. Building all staff and leadership capability to routinely monitor, review and action the data insights and learning patterns revealed is essential, as is also partnering with students to reality-check data interpretations and analyses. As institutional data maturity evolves, increasingly sophisticated diagnostic, predicative and prescriptive analytics will enable more granular data-driven decision-making to support third generation success interventions (Khosravi et al., 2025).

Universities will need to remain ever-vigilant to ensure that existing digital *in*equity is not exacerbated (e.g., by assuring all students have equitable access to quality AI tools and by developing in curriculum the general and discipline-specific AI and digital literacies required, including critical thinking for AI engagement and the value of learner agency). Adequate safeguards must also be in place both to ensure the ethical stewardship of student data (as referenced above), and to protect against potential harm caused by algorithmic, cultural and/ or language biases that perpetuate exclusion or produce unfair or discriminatory outcomes for equity-deserving cohorts (e.g., in the admissions context). Transparency in disclosing to students and staff the what, why, how and where of AI's use, and its often-invisible application, should be particularly front of mind.

While most of the focus now is on AI's impact on learning, teaching and assessment, institutions also should continue scanning for digital technologies that can improve access to the right to higher education (Harden-Wolfson, 2024) and the necessity for lifelong learning. For example, the Accord recommended the development of a "National Skills Passport to help individuals demonstrate the skills they have obtained to employers, supported by improvements to credit transfer and recognition of prior learning" (Department of Education, 2024a, p. 3). An initiative that unlocks existing (but hidden) learning and workforce capability in this way is one to which blockchain technology can be applied or for which existing platforms (e.g., My eQuals) could be leveraged. AI's capacity to equitably support recognition of both prior learning *and prior experience* offers a valuable lifelong learning application that can enrich each student's individual success story.

Conclusion

From its 2005 inception, transition pedagogy was a targeted response to consistent findings that, despite decades of attention, efforts to enhance diverse students' FYEs had delivered little improvement. Soon after its articulation, we observed in 2010 that "Internationally, mass higher education and widening participation have focussed attention on student heterogeneity and the challenges of mediating that difference in increasingly resource-poor environments" (Kift et al., 2010, p. 7). In 2025, after two decades of transition pedagogy, it is sadly apparent that the big success issues that perplex and confound us today are remarkably similar to those which confronted and informed the framework's genesis and early development (Kift, 2025a, first article). These include:

- The imperative to mainstream inclusion and the adoption of universal design for inclusive excellence;
- The recognition of inclusive curriculum's central uplift role as the affirmative and integrative glue for student success;
- The underplayed dynamic of continuous transitionary states on students' mental wellbeing and embodied experiences of learning and success;
- The slow embrace of whole-of-institution approaches for the culture and structures that assure coherent, coordinated and relationship-rich education for all learners, in which systemic barriers are routinely anticipated and dismantled;
- The need for a paradigm shift *from* deficit approaches that blame under-prepared students for not self-curating their own remediation *to* an equity-minded "university for all" ethos;
- The urgent imperative to move from theory to action on student success, leveraging consilient understanding of decades of disparate research streams, to ensure the "right to higher education" is a "meaningful right (instead of a 'quasi-right')" (Harden-Wolfson, 2024, p. 16); and,
- The systematic activation of new ways of cross-institutional working to harness the distributed expertise of academic and professional staff partnerships with students.

This review trilogy was largely written in the shadow of an Australian election, which could have seen much of the Universities Accord's big, bold HE blueprint relegated to history. Fortunately now post-election, the Accord lives on but, like the current threat to diversity, equity and inclusion on the other side of the Pacific, the lesson of precarity is salutary. The pedagogical gains over the past decades have not been sufficient to shift the student success dial in any particularly substantive way. But

our shared vision for a better, fairer, expanded tertiary education system, one capable of surviving political short-termism, should sustain and inspire us to do better. While the politics might change, the enduring fundamentals remain strong and clear. Our collective mission is to advance the universal university for all – a university where learning and success are inclusive by default; where, regardless of entering background and circumstances, student experiences are coherent and relentlessly transformative, not transactional; where individual students feel they matter, are valued and will be supported with care and compassion to be, become and belong across their continuous transitionary states; and, where the need for students to seek individual adjustments is significantly reduced because every aspect of the interface, in every setting, is proactively designed with inclusion at its core. That's a call to action around which disparate agendas can coalesce, actuate and iterate, and to which transition pedagogy can be applied effectively, efficiently and holistically.

Transition pedagogy has proven to be a practical, affirmative and evidence-based framework that enables the cultural and structural conditions necessary to meet every student where they are, honouring their aspirations, accommodating their diverse needs, and moving beyond the fragmented student experience that serves no one well. At its heart lies the one enduring element common to all staff and all students: the mediation of the institutional core business of learning and teaching through fit-for-purpose, adaptive curriculum.

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