

Enacting Transition Pedagogy at a School Level: An Action Research Analysis of Institutional Change Using Schein's Model of Organisational Culture

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Abstract

Transition pedagogy is a whole-of-institution approach for supporting learning across diverse student cohorts through intentional, integrated (co-)curricular design. However, in large institutions, it is not always possible to enact transition pedagogy across the whole organisation. This action research study examines a multi-year transition pedagogy project to influence organisational culture in an academic School, as an example of locally-enacted transition pedagogy. Schein's model of organisational culture was used as a lens for iterative examination of artifacts for evidence of change in underlying assumptions and values. Analysis identified four organisational principles that were important to create an environment to facilitate successful localised implementation: *teaching context*; *collegial conversation*; *institutional knowledge*; and *growth and leadership*, albeit alongside *external vulnerability*. The study shows that it is possible and valuable to successfully enact transition pedagogy at local scales. The findings underscore the potential for scalable and adaptable application of transition pedagogy principles in similar educational settings.

Keywords: Transition pedagogy; action research; organisational change; university; student experience; Schein.

Introduction

Transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) emerged as a means of addressing the challenges of a global higher education context facing higher attrition rates, greater student diversity, and increased accountability for student outcomes (Marginson, 2016, 2023). In recent decades, the landscape of higher education has undergone significant transformation, most recently through the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of generative artificial intelligence, necessitating a re-evaluation of pedagogical frameworks to better support the increasing diversity and changing needs of universities, staff and students (Lodge et al., 2023). Transition pedagogy has been an enduring and influential conceptual framework designed to enhance student engagement and retention through targeted first-year experience strategies (Kift, 2009, 2015; Kift et al., 2010).

Kift's framework is built around six interconnected principles: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring. These principles are aimed at scaffolding and enhancing the first-year learning experience through whole-of-institution focus on embedding support directly into the curriculum rather than treating it as a peripheral service (Kift, 2009). The framework advocates for an inclusive curriculum design, acknowledging the varied cultural, educational, and social backgrounds of students, thereby promoting an equitable learning environment. It emphasises proactive design, wherein the curriculum itself is the principal support mechanism for first-year students, infused with intentional strategies to build academic and social engagement.



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While transition pedagogy has garnered substantial support, it has attracted criticism for a view of transition as induction to the university, which minimises the diversity of students' lived experiences (Gale & Parker, 2014) and positions students as subjects not agents within the university (Naylor et al., 2021), although more recent work has grappled with these criticisms (Kift, 2021) and broadened the approach beyond the first-year experience (O'Donnell et al., 2015). Scholars also highlight that the framework, while comprehensive, demands substantial resource allocation, leadership and institutional restructuring (Kift et al., 2010), which may not be feasible for all contexts. Both Kift et al. (2010) and O'Donnell et al. (2015) highlight the critical role of institutional leadership in fostering an environment conducive to the successful implementation of the structured first-year experience of transition pedagogy. They argued that for the framework to be effectively realised, it requires not just curriculum changes but a cultural shift within institutions towards a more student-centred approach.

This study analyses an organisational change project. Project goals were to use transition pedagogy to increase education quality within a School of Allied Health; success entailed positive cultural change regarding how teaching was institutionally recognised, and culturally and operationally embedding transition pedagogy principles. Although transition pedagogy has been influential, particularly in Australian higher education, relatively few papers are informed by research into organisational change to help achieve cultural shifts (e.g., Araujo et al., 2014; Armstrong & McNamara, 2011; Kift et al., 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2015). These case studies also typically report post-hoc evaluations, rather than describing the process required to embed transition pedagogy as "everyone's business" within an organisational structure, which may limit their contribution to the literature for university leaders and practitioners.

Our research study sought to address these gaps by adopting an action research methodology during the project to examine the following questions:

1. *Is it possible to successfully enact a transition pedagogy model within an allied health school in a research-intensive university?*
2. *Does incorporating organisational change theory into the project assist in the implementation and evaluation of a transition pedagogy model?*

This study makes pragmatic, methodological and theoretical contributions to the literature by providing a case study of organisational change. This case study is explicitly informed by research on organisational change, and uses a methodology (action research) which is under-utilised within the transition pedagogy literature to articulate the process of change. This combination of factors makes this study a unique contribution (to the researcher's knowledge) to the field of transition pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Schein's (1985) model of organisational change to frame the implementation and evaluation of cultural change in this study. Schein's (2002) model is based in Lewin's earlier three-phase model of organisational change detailing the process of "unfreezing," "change," and "refreezing" (Lewin, 1999 [1952]). The "unfreezing" stage involves creating awareness of the need for change, which is achieved by demonstrating discrepancies between current behaviours and the desired state or by showing how current behaviours are ineffective. This stage is crucial for weakening the hold of existing cultures and practices and preparing the organisation for change. The "change" stage involves identifying, testing, and learning new behaviours, processes, and beliefs that can solve new problems. This stage is where actual transformation occurs. It often requires effective leadership, persuasive communication, and the demonstrable support of the organisation at all levels. Leaders play a critical role in modelling behaviours that reflect the new values and practices. The final stage, "refreezing," involves reinforcing and institutionalizing the new changes into the organisational culture. This stage is necessary to ensure that the new behaviours become a stable and enduring part of the organisation. Schein emphasises the importance of supporting mechanisms such as organisational structure, reward systems, and methods of operation, which need to be realigned to the new practices to cement the changes firmly (Schein, 2002).

Schein's theory is anchored in the concept of organisational culture, which he defines as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration (Schein, 1985). For Schein, organisational culture is not only a powerful influence on employee behaviour but also a pivotal factor in managing change. Schein conceptualises organisational culture in three distinct layers, each critical to understanding and managing change in a university setting (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Makumbe & Washaya, 2022):

1. **Artifacts:** This level includes the visible and tangible elements of an organisation. In universities, artifacts may manifest as the physical environment, teaching and administrative processes and procedures, and the visible behaviour of members. Artifacts are the most superficial layer of culture but typically embody deeper values and norms.
2. **Espoused Values:** These are the explicitly stated values and norms that members of an organisation claim to follow, including mission statements, strategic plans, policies, and public declarations of commitment to certain goals like inclusivity, research excellence, and student success. While espoused values are a more explicit expression of culture, there can often be a discrepancy between these stated values and what is enacted in practice.
3. **Underlying Assumptions:** This deepest level includes taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. In higher education, these assumptions might underlie views on the nature of learning and education, the role of the university in society, and deeply ingrained beliefs about education delivery methods. These assumptions are the most difficult to change and the most impactful when it comes to driving or resisting organisational change.

Understanding these layers is crucial when attempting to implement cultural change within universities. Changes at the level of artifacts are often the most visible but may not lead to genuine transformation unless they are aligned with the deeper layers of values and assumptions (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Makumbe & Washaya, 2022; Schein, 1985, 2002). This understanding identifies a hierarchy of evidence and their relationships to inform monitoring of the change process, and ensure it is of high quality. Although linear models of organisational change including Schein's have been criticised (Maes & Van Hootegem, 2019), they potentially provide a framework for university leaders to diagnose cultural barriers and leverage points. Effective change initiatives in higher education must consider not only the introduction of new artifacts but also how these changes resonate with or challenge the existing espoused values and underlying assumptions.

Methodology

We conducted an action research study in a School of Allied Health at a research-intensive university in Australia. Action research is a collaborative approach that integrates theory and practice to address real-world issues and generate actionable knowledge based on cycles of planning, action, observation (which includes data collection and evaluation), and reflection (Casey & Coghlan, 2021). It aims to solve practical problems by implementing and evaluating actions iteratively (Creswell, 2015). Through this four-step cycle, educators adjust actions in the next round of each cycle to improve the efficacy of the program in real contexts (Creswell, 2015).

Context

The context for this study was a School of Allied Health that enrolls over 4,000 students annually across seven disciplines and 13 undergraduate and postgraduate courses. All but two of these courses are professionally accredited. Over 200 full-time and part-time teaching staff are employed, alongside approximately 100 casual teaching staff during two major semesters and several intensive sessions annually. The majority of contracted staff are employed on a research and teaching basis, but approximately a tenth hold education-focused positions, including as clinical educators. Many academic staff have clinical as well as academic backgrounds.

The School is located within a Faculty of Medicine and Health (FMH) within the wider university, although prior to 2020, the School formed a separate Faculty of Health Sciences at a satellite campus. From 2019-2020, the then-Faculty physically and organisationally moved to join its new Faculty at the main university campus. The School is now led by an executive group consisting of a Dean, School Manager, two Directors of Education, and one (2020-2023) or two (2024) Directors of Academic Career Development. The study author is one of the Directors of Education. There is also a School Leadership Group (consisting of executives plus Heads of Discipline), and an Education Advisory Group (consisting of the Directors of Education plus Program Directors and Major Coordinators, which was reframed as an Education Leadership Group during this project). Although consistency with Faculty and University processes and policies is required, in practice, the School has considerable discretion in decision making, process change, and budgeting.

This project arose from an FMH strategic goal to increase education quality and student satisfaction initiated in 2020, alongside a University-wide designation of key first-year subjects (called "units" at the institution) as "transition units." Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic also had a profound effect on staff morale, experience and workload, as well as on students' experiences and satisfaction, given the need to teach practical clinical skills in a COVID-safe learning context. These factors combined to create strong focus on the pedagogical culture of the School, and we (Directors of Education) decided to adopt transition pedagogy as a framework for approaching this cultural and pedagogical reform.

Data Collection, Ethics and Positionality

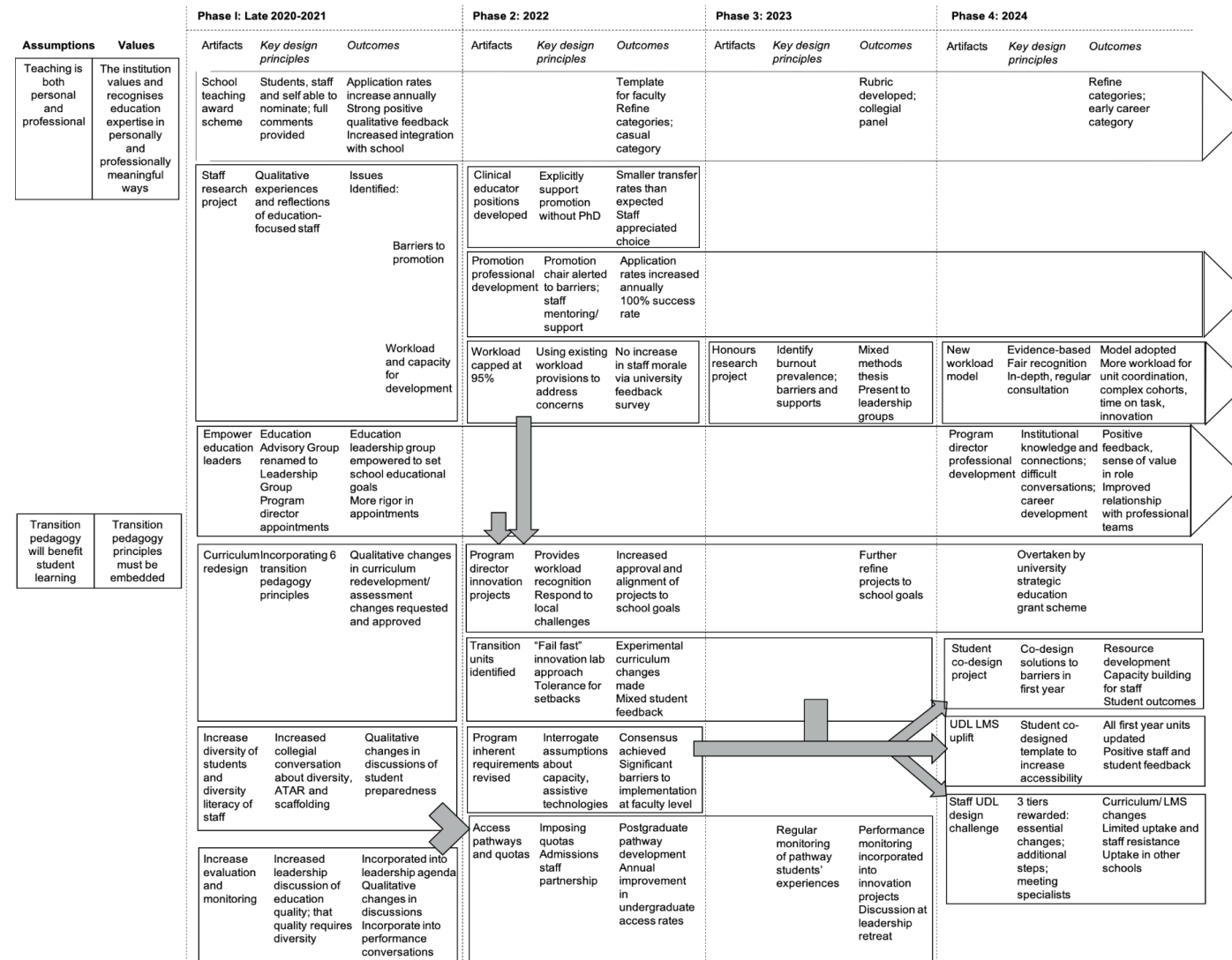
During the project, we (co-leaders) used multiple artifacts intended to better capture the complex realities of cultural change in the School (Figure 1), and active collaboration was sought throughout. University human research ethics approval was obtained for projects labelled “research projects” in Figure 1, although informal conversations with colleagues also shaped project directions (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). Other quantitative evaluation was performed using pre-existing anonymous survey data (e.g., staff feedback surveys) or de-identified and aggregated operational data (e.g., student satisfaction surveys and access rates). These steps were intended to minimise coercion or other ethical issues related to my role as both insider-researcher and project co-lead. There are particular ethical issues in action research regarding the entwined roles of an insider-researcher; the responsibilities of an engaged leader to support, develop and manage staff may be in tension with a researcher’s aspirations for research reliability and transferability to inform other contexts, or the ethical requirements to protect participants’ identities and sensitive information (Gibbs et al., 2017).

I co-led the project’s activities with the School’s other Director of Education. Field notes, university documents and ongoing reflections were the main research data sources. Within the process of action research, I acknowledge my positionality as both an insider embedded in the structures and cultures of the School and holding positional leadership, and outsider. This insider perspective affords me a nuanced understanding of faculty dynamics, administrative policies, theory and student engagement, which informs my analysis and interpretations. Simultaneously, I am an outsider in that I am not an allied health academic, and joined the School at the start of this study, so my experiences within the School have not directly reflected those of other staff or those of our diverse students.

This standpoint is in dialogue with the positionality I bring as researcher. I am an established researcher in the field of higher education and passionate about quality of teaching and the student experience. This case study was reviewed by several members of the school, of different academic levels, to reduce (if possible) over-emphasising my own perspective. However, the case study remains insider-research conducted in collaboration with other insiders, and reported by a researcher who was not just a participant but a leader within the project. My values, assumptions and privilege are inseparable from the research.

Figure 1

Project activities, evidence and outcomes grouped by action research phase, and assumptions and values



Notes: “Unfreezing” occurs on the left of the figure, moves through a change period and is either refrozen (solid line) or continues with change at the time of writing (arrowhead). Integration between projects is indicated with grey arrows.

Analysis of Action Research Cycles and Findings

From reflection of our experience, institutional knowledge and understanding of the literature, two key assumptions were identified that were not present in the institutional culture: that teaching is “both personal and professional” (Kift, 2009) and that transition pedagogy would benefit students’ learning (p. 18). These were operationalised into two values (Schein, 1985), that the institution values and recognises educational expertise in personally *and* professionally meaningful ways; and that transition pedagogical principles must be embedded in culture and practice (Figure 1). Following Schein’s (2002) model, we developed a framework that would allow us to unfreeze and change School assumptions and values, and identified artifacts to monitor successful change. We then began action research cycles of reflecting, planning, acting, and observing over four near-annual periods.

Phase 1: Late 2020-2021

During the first phase, six projects (shown in Figure 1, second column) were initiated; the school teaching award scheme began in late 2020, and other projects, in 2021.

Our initial reflections suggested that, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, academics did not have the morale or capacity to instantiate transition pedagogy without focus on, and reward for, the effort they were providing in their response to the pandemic. As such, the teaching award scheme was the first project initiated. The implementation of the scheme allowed for self-nominations, as well as nominations from students and colleagues, and the full text of nominations were provided to staff. This was intended to demonstrate the impact academics had achieved through their teaching, and create an environment where teaching is discussed and celebrated, enhancing recognition across the school. Since 2020, small changes have been made annually, for example, the language used in award categories was refined and expanded to include specific categories for casual and early-career staff, leading to broader inclusivity. By 2023, the decision-making process for awards was assigned to an independent collegial panel, enhancing the integrity and transparency of the awards. Application rates have shown an annual increase, reflecting growing engagement.

Education leaders were empowered as a means of institutionally recognising and rewarding their expertise. Processes and position descriptions for appointment of program directors were updated to indicate a leadership, rather than administrative, role. The School Education Advisory Group was renamed the Education Leadership Group (ELG) and empowered to set educational goals for the School based on their expertise as educators. This empowerment was further developed in later phases to reinforce cultural changes.

A qualitative research project was initiated to understand the experiences of education-focused staff. Key barriers identified included lack of promotion opportunities, heavy workload without time for reflection or improvement, and limited capacity for development. Insights from these reflections were used to tailor subsequent project phases to better support staff and innovation.

Three projects (Figure 1) focused on embedding transition pedagogy principles through cultural change. The ELG and Heads of Discipline participated in facilitated discussion with equity experts to enhance their diversity literacy (including the limitations of ATAR¹ and the importance of transition scaffolding) and elevate discussions of evaluation and monitoring. Diversity literacy and evaluation were also progressively integrated into academics’ annual performance discussions, aligning personal development with institutional goals. Qualitative changes in curriculum redevelopment and assessment changes requested and approved began to indicate successful integration.

Phase 2: 2022

Building on the findings from the phase 1 research project, the School, working with the faculty, introduced clinical educator roles, enabling progression to Senior Lecturer positions without the necessity of a PhD (identified as a barrier for several education-focused staff). Despite support being offered to transfer to the new roles, transfer rates were lower than expected. However, staff who chose not to transfer still expressed heightened satisfaction regarding career progression options and sense of support from the school. Concurrently, a support system, including mentoring for education-focused academics, was established to facilitate promotion applications. As a result, promotion application rates among education-focused staff increased in 2022, 2023 and 2024. Teaching and research staff benefited from mentoring for the education narrative component of promotion applications, and School staff achieved 100% success rates each year since 2022.

¹ The ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) is a percentile rank rather than a mark, indicating a student's position relative to their peers within the same age group for a given year.

Limited options were available within the existing workload provisions for addressing sense of overload for teaching staff. As a partial solution, teaching workload “points” were capped at 95% of expected load (with an acceptable range of 90-100%) instead of 100% (range 95-105%). Some units were rested, retired or combined to accommodate the change in expectations, and new staff were hired. However, no significant improvement in staff satisfaction with workload was observed in university feedback surveys. Staff overload underwent further investigation in phase 3 of the project.

School workload provisions allowed for innovation projects, which were realigned to be led by program directors to enhance transition pedagogy and further empower them as education leaders. The projects required alignment with school goals for approval. This alignment was progressively refined, further incorporating key transition pedagogy principles. The innovation projects were suspended in 2024 due to the reintroduction of university strategic education grants.

Key transition units were identified for curriculum redesign, incorporating transition pedagogies. Although this dovetailed with a university initiative, the school adopted a “fail fast” design lab approach to explore new curricular approaches. A key aspect for academics’ engagement was explicit tolerance for setbacks, such as decreased student satisfaction because of an experimental intervention not being treated punitively. These design labs continued to be refined in phase 3.

To further increase student diversity, program inherent requirements were revised. A key aspect of this process was working with disciplines to collegially interrogate assumptions about capacity and assistive technologies. Although consensus was reached with program directors, significant barriers to implementation were encountered at the faculty level, and the revised documents were only approved in 2025. Furthermore, access pathways for postgraduate courses for students from regional backgrounds and students with disabilities were developed, and admission quotas for students from equity backgrounds were imposed for all high-demand undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Due to university approval timelines, the postgraduate pathways were opened for admission in 2024, while undergraduate quotas were implemented immediately, and have demonstrated annual improvement in access rates. Key to success in both areas was effective partnership with admissions staff and ongoing monitoring of pathway students’ experiences and performance. Increased evaluation and monitoring also formed a key part of the innovation projects. It was also highlighted for extended discussion at the school leadership retreat, further embedding it as a school value.

Phase 3: 2023

Having instantiated significant changes to school processes in phases 1 and 2, we observed positive changes in the culture and values of the school. Although our approach had made use of existing processes wherever possible, we also observed change fatigue among staff, including in the leadership group. We therefore decided to consolidate the cultural changes we had established so far (refreezing) with only minor changes to ongoing initiatives. The exception was continued research into staff work experiences to further develop the evidence base for change. This research formed an Honours (final year undergraduate capstone) project, identifying staff burnout prevalence, and institutional demands, barriers and supports impacting educators’ work lives. Project findings were presented to school, faculty and university leadership groups.

Phase 4: 2024

In the final phase of the project, the opportunity arose through the university enterprise agreement to redevelop the faculty workload model. This provided the opportunity to use the previous evidence collected in this research to inform the new model’s development to ensure fair recognition for teaching activities. This included recognition that some student cohorts required more complex support than others (e.g. first-year cohorts and placement and work-integrated learning units) and allowed time for innovation and professional development. A key aspect was harnessing the trust and educational leadership established during the action research, to engage in regular, in-depth consultation as the workload model was developed. As a result, the model was adopted faculty-wide, with far higher support in the case study school than in other faculty schools.

Alongside this work, we continued to invest in professional development for program directors. Three workshops were developed. The first focused on increasing institutional knowledge, and connections and partnerships with professional staff, which was a key finding from Kift (2009). The second focused on having difficult conversations, and the third on career development as academic leaders. These workshops generated positive feedback from participants, including increased sense that they were valued in their roles, and supported improved partnerships with professional teams.

Finally, the projects focused on embedding transition pedagogy were united in three projects centred on student co-design and embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2024) principles. This work was supported by a university strategic education grant focused on reducing grade inequities for students from equity backgrounds. Three student co-design teams worked with academics to develop solutions to barriers in first year, leading to resource development, capacity building for

staff, and reduced grade inequities for students from equity group backgrounds. All first-year units' LMS pages were updated using a student co-designed template which aimed to increase accessibility and navigability, generating positive staff and student feedback. Finally, school staff participated in a UDL design challenge, with rewards for making essential accessibility changes to LMS sites, and further rewards for making additional UDL interventions and meeting with UDL specialists for advice. Despite some curriculum and LMS changes being made, this was the least successful intervention of the three, although the model was more successfully adopted in another school. The limited uptake appeared to be due to the simultaneous occurrence of workload model negotiations; staff reported that the rewards for participation (coffee vouchers and certificates of commendation) were inappropriate compared to extra workload allocations.

Discussion

This study immersed itself in the practical and theoretical applications of transition pedagogy within a School of Allied Health at a research-intensive university, guided by Schein's model of organisational culture as a framework. The research pursued answers to two fundamental questions: the viability of enacting transition pedagogy in a specific academic context, and the utility of organisational change theory in this application. Through this exploration, we have garnered insights that contribute significantly to the literature on transition pedagogy and provide practical implications for educational leaders aiming to enact similar changes in their institutions.

Addressing the Research Questions

The findings from this study confirm that it is possible to successfully enact a transition pedagogy model within such a context, as evidenced by both the leadership group's assessment of School culture, and the artifacts embodying school values in Figure 1 (Schein, 2002). The adaptation of the transition pedagogy model was aligned with the school's strategic goals and integrated into the curriculum and school culture over multiple phases of action research. However, success was heavily contingent on specific preconditions being embedded within the cultural and operational fabric of the school—specifically, the value of personal and professional recognition of teaching expertise as a professionalised and valuable aspect of academic work (James et al., 2015). This integration was evidenced by the increasing formal and informal recognition of educational achievements, development in leadership roles to support educational priorities, and tangible shifts in curriculum design to incorporate transition pedagogy principles.

Incorporating Schein's (1985) theory of organisational change was also effective in guiding the implementation and evaluation processes. The stages of unfreezing, change, and refreezing provided a structured pathway for introducing, testing, and solidifying new pedagogical practices and cultural norms, and also assisted in the reflecting and planning stages of the action research (Lewin, 1999; Schein, 2002). The theoretical understanding of the relationships between artifacts, values and assumptions also helped in effective evaluation of the project phases, particularly in identifying evidence that would demonstrate deeper cultural change, not surface-level influences.

Key Reflections from the Action Research

This action research study illuminated several critical reflections that significantly influenced the successful enactment of transition pedagogy within the School of Allied Health. Each reflection not only shaped our approach but also pointed to broader implications for understanding and implementing transition pedagogy in similar contexts.

Teaching Context: The findings of this study draw attention to the substantial influence of the teaching context on the implementation of transition pedagogy. Unlike Kift's original assumptions (Kift, 2009), which suggested a somewhat universal applicability of transition pedagogy, our study found the context in which teaching occurs to be a pivotal factor in determining implementation success. The allied health context, characterised by a strong professional orientation and a commitment to diversity, facilitated change. However, challenges such as change fatigue and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated adaptations that recognised and valued educational expertise. I must acknowledge again the centrality in my own values of the student experience, and fair reward and recognition for staff, possibly leading to over-emphasis of these assumptions during the project. Despite this, a cultural shift that saw increased recognition and celebration of teaching efforts was evident, as seen through the artifacts of the school teaching award scheme and teaching workload model—and also noting the ongoing changes to the teaching awards to better suit the school's teaching context and recognition needs.

Collegial Conversation: The role of collegial conversation extended beyond mere communication; it was a foundational mechanism for data collection, reflection, and intervention. Informal interactions facilitated the sharing of insights and concerns that were critical in shaping the project's trajectory (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). Corridor conversations and collegial emails provided qualitative insights that were pivotal artifacts to understand the nuances of staff and student

experiences. These conversations led to actionable changes in staff recognition schemes and adjustments in School leadership roles to promote educational goals beyond the role's mere administrative functions.

Institutional Knowledge: Developing a deep understanding of the institution's culture, processes, and structures was essential for effectively embedding transition pedagogy, highlighting the strengths of insider-researcher perspectives. The project's success was partly due to leveraging institutional knowledge to design interventions that were congruent with existing values and practices, but innovative enough to initiate change. For example, understanding the significance of program directors as educational leaders led to their empowerment, while also highlighting the need for their professional development. Trust was built through interventions that were fit for context, which was crucial in mitigating scepticism and resistance to new initiatives.

Growth and Leadership: The engagement and support of school leadership were found to be indispensable. The allocation of a modest budget for the project underscored the leadership's commitment to educational improvements, which bolstered the confidence and participation of other staff members. Leadership support facilitated the growth of program directors, who were pivotal in disseminating and normalizing transition pedagogy principles across the school. This empowerment was evident in the restructuring of the Education Advisory Group into a more dynamic Education Leadership Group, which played a significant role in setting and pursuing educational excellence.

External Vulnerability: The study revealed the vulnerability of school-level initiatives to broader institutional decisions, such as budget allocations, policy reforms, and strategic priorities. While the school managed to adapt to some external changes creatively—for instance by integrating university strategic education funding into ongoing projects—it also faced constraints that limited the scope of certain initiatives. This vulnerability underscores the need for strategic flexibility in being able to opportunistically align school-level initiatives with institutional strategies, and actively engaging with institutional planning to ensure sustainability and scalability of local reforms where possible. Managing this vulnerability remains a challenge for strategic change at School level.

Implications for Practice

One major limitation of this study, identified by Gibbs et al. (2017) as an issue in much action research, was the inherent tensions posed by the insider-researcher role. While this position provided deep insights and facilitated access, it raised challenges as both participant and researcher that were addressed where possible but could not be entirely eliminated. Furthermore, the embedded, reflective nature of action research may limit the applicability of these findings to other contexts (Creswell, 2015; Gibbs et al., 2017). Schools with different cultural dynamics, institutional priorities, or resource availability might experience different challenges and successes.

However, the insights garnered from this study offer some implications for practice, particularly for educational leaders and practitioners interested in implementing transition pedagogy at more local levels than those originally proposed (Kift, 2009; Kift et al., 2010). Firstly, the critical role of context cannot be overstated. Leaders should conduct a thorough assessment of their unique educational environments to understand the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities before implementing transition pedagogy (Hoover & Harder, 2015); identifying artifacts to monitor for deeper values (Schein, 2002) proved effective here. This involves appreciating the specific professional and cultural characteristics of the academic disciplines involved, as well as broader context such as workload modelling and mechanisms of recognition, and global experiences including COVID-19. Furthermore, vulnerabilities to institutional dynamics and external changes highlight the need for flexibility and adaptability in planning and implementation, especially given that school-based leadership must adapt to faculty and university-level priorities and funding opportunities. Although engaging with broader institutional planning and decision-making processes can enhance the alignment and sustainability of local initiatives, this case study demonstrates that it is possible to negotiate these tensions, and successfully embed a school-based transition pedagogy.

Secondly, the importance of fostering a culture of collegial conversation and open dialogue as a means of data collection and intervention should be emphasised (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). By encouraging informal interactions and formal feedback mechanisms, institutions can create a robust feedback loop that informs and enhances transition pedagogy initiatives. For instance, the use of corridor conversations and informal emails in our study provided insights that were not captured through formal data collection methods but were crucial artifacts in shaping project outcomes. Distributed leadership and student co-design models extend this idea that positive change can come from every level (Jones, 2014; Naylor et al., 2021). Relatedly, the empowerment of leaders within schools, such as program directors, is crucial (James et al., 2015). By providing these leaders with the tools, authority, and support necessary to champion transition pedagogy, institutions can ensure deeper and more widespread implementation of pedagogical reforms. Leaders should focus on capacity-building initiatives that enhance the leadership skills of these key personnel, thereby promoting an authentically distributed leadership model (Jones, 2014).

Conclusion

This study is significant as it provides a detailed, empirical exploration into the localised implementation of transition pedagogy—uniquely, within an allied health school in a research-intensive university (Araújo et al., 2014; Armstrong & McNamara, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2015). Using Schein's model of organisational change (Schein, 1985, 2002) as a theoretical framework for this action research demonstrated both enhanced practical and evaluation outcomes, and provided theoretical insight into managing organisational change, showcasing how theories of organisational culture can bolster the implementation and sustainability of pedagogical innovations. The findings contribute valuable insights into the critical role of contextual factors, collegial dialogue, leadership, and institutional knowledge and alignment in the successful enactment of educational reforms (James et al., 2015; Jones, 2014; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). Furthermore, this study may pragmatically guide and inspire other academic schools and university leaders that seek to embed transition pedagogy principles but face similar constraints of scale, resources, or institutional culture.

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