

Seen and Supported: Implementing a University-Wide Transition Framework to Improve First-Year Success

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Abstract

A transition pedagogy framework acknowledges students' transition into university from diverse backgrounds, with varied preparedness for studying at university. It puts the onus on the university to provide a seamless experience, and specifies that initiatives should be curriculum-centred, promote diversity and include a whole-of-institution approach. The aim of this project was to increase commencing student success by embedding principles of transition pedagogy throughout the first-year curriculum. This article outlines the components of a university-wide Transition Framework that was developed at a large Australian regional university, based on our interpretation of transition pedagogy, to unify academics and professional staff in supporting first-year students. Since the project commenced in 2017, both internal and online commencing success rates have increased. A key finding is the importance of a coordinated approach to identifying disengaged students and providing targeted support at multiple time points early in the semester to reduce the number of fail grades.

Keywords: First year transition; UDL; kindness; student experience; transition pedagogy; higher education.

Introduction

The first year of university is a critical time to engage students, provide a sense of belonging and prepare for future success. Almost 20 years ago, Kift and Nelson (2005) introduced us to the concept of a transition pedagogy. This was followed by the development of Kift's Transition Pedagogy framework (Kift, 2009). This work was developed to ensure that as students transition into university, their first-year experience becomes a seamless experience across the entire institution (Kift & Nelson, 2005). Transition pedagogy encompasses six First Year Curriculum Principles that incorporate good first year teaching and *just-in-time* and *just-for-me* support: Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment as well as Evaluation and Monitoring (Kift, 2009; Nelson et al., 2006). However, we have not seen transformational changes to student retention and success across Australian universities since they were developed; the adjusted retention rate for domestic undergraduate students studying at Australian public universities was 85.28% in 2006 before transition pedagogy was developed and 85.03% in 2022, 13 years later. Similarly, student success rates have remained stagnant (Department of Education, 2025). It could be argued that no movement is a success given that there has been a large increase in student enrolments, particularly students from equity backgrounds (Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). However, some students from equity backgrounds continue to be left behind.

Kift and Nelson (2005) proposed that to see meaningful improvements in student retention, initiatives should be curriculum-centred, promote diversity and include a whole-of-institution approach from the early conceptions of transition pedagogy, long-term sustainability of initiatives, at-scale, were seen as primary challenges to overcome (Kift & Nelson, 2005). Recent



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interpretations of transition pedagogy have partially addressed this challenge by completely abandoning the traditional semester in favour of shorter periods of teaching. At a metropolitan Australian university for example, first-year units were moved from a traditional semester format to an intensive 4-week block studied sequentially. This required an overhaul of the curriculum, assessment and support, leading to a 10% increase in unit marks across the whole first-year (Loton et al., 2022). Following this work, a regional Australian university produced similar results with a comparable scale of institutional commitment. Students were enrolled in two 6-week units, four times across the year for full-time study. A new culture of assessment and tutorial-based learning was developed, with a move away from traditional lectures and exams. Student success increased by an average of 10.8% across the first two years after the block model was implemented (Wilson et al., 2024). When a university has the enthusiasm for large scale change, this can translate to improvements in student success. A whole-of-institution approach is important for a seamless delivery of support and services for students. However, for institutions that are not prepared for the risk and expense of a complete institutional restructure, how can transition pedagogy still be implemented to improve student success, particularly for equity students? In this article, the authors outline the design of a Transition Framework, based on Kift's (2009) transition pedagogy framework and implemented over many years across a large institution. While the authors have already published some elements of the Framework, this article brings the pieces together to provide a broad overview and a high-level evaluation of the Framework focussing on analysis of students enrolled in 2023.

Literature Review

The first-year curriculum should consider students' backgrounds, patterns of study and few, if any, assumptions should be made about existing skills and knowledge (Kift, 2009). The educational outcomes of equity students are consistently poorer than their more advantaged peers, and some of this can be directly explained by individual barriers to higher education (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, equity should not be considered in one dimension and cumulative disadvantage of equity factors is associated with markedly poorer outcomes (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). It is also important to consider that student diversity extends past equity factors. Pathways to university, study load and study mode are also important factors when considering the diversity of a student cohort. For example, from 2019 to 2022, students studying part-time in Australia, were more than twice as likely to drop out of university compared to full-time students (Department of Education, 2024). Institutions should focus on how they can remove structural inequalities and thus how academic cultures may adapt to fit the needs of student cohorts (Naylor, 2017; O'Shea, 2016). One way to do this is by implementing the principles of transition pedagogy throughout the first-year curriculum. A barrier for academics to support diverse cohorts is having a good understanding of who is enrolled. Unit coordinators and educational designers should be provided with information on cohort demographics, patterns of study and metrics of student success. When informed with meaningful cohort data, academics can create inclusive teaching environments and improve the educational experience (Williamson & Kizilcec, 2022).

According to Kift and Field (2009), curriculum should be intentionally designed to ensure consistency and clarity, facilitating students' transition from their previous educational experiences to both higher education and their specific discipline of study. Unit design and delivery should prioritise a student-centred approach, explicitly providing the foundational skills necessary for first-year success. The content should be scaffolded, with a deliberate sequencing of knowledge and skills. Incorporating innovative, evidence-based teaching strategies, such as flexible submission portals, clearly defined rubrics, exemplars, and consistent unit guidelines enhances student engagement, retention and success (Harrington et al., 2024). There are several synergistic frameworks that align with transition pedagogy principles that were not part of Kift's first articulation. For example, employing principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) involves inclusive curriculum and support (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018), and increased flexibility and accessibility to the benefit of all students. A meta-analysis found that UDL moderately improved academic achievement and highlighted the effectiveness of implementing UDL for diverse learners, including the importance of flexible and inclusive teaching practices (King-Sears et al., 2023). Additionally, incorporating a pedagogy of kindness can further enhance the inclusivity of the educational environment. Kindness in education, particularly in higher education and online study, is increasingly prevalent (Fox & Aspland, 2024), contributing to inclusivity, and enhancing student wellbeing and success (Gorny-Wegrzyn, 2021; Stephens, 2021). Kindness in education goes beyond traditional acts of kindness to consider students' feelings and demonstrate acceptance. Recognising the relational element of higher education and incorporating a pedagogy of kindness and compassion can enhance meaningful interactions and enhance learning and teaching practices (Andrew et al., 2023). In the context of teaching, kindness encompasses a commitment to understanding and responding to students' individual circumstances with empathy, compassion, and care. Although the relevance of kindness in teaching was acknowledged as early as Willard (1929), its importance has been amplified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for more compassionate and responsive educational practices. This includes offering constructive and supportive feedback, fostering a sense of belonging, and being attuned to the diverse challenges students may face, such as caregiving responsibilities (Gorny-Wegrzyn & Perry, 2021).

To facilitate a successful transition to higher education assessments, students should receive regular feedback and *feedforward* to enhance their learning, as students frequently use assessment to define what is important in the curriculum (Kift, 2015). Literature has highlighted the importance of focussing on formative assessment or assessment *for* learning (Ninomiya, 2016), as opposed to assessment *of* learning (aimed at producing a graded outcome). This shift highlights the importance of assessment processes that enable students to refine and enhance their work through evaluative judgement (Boud et al., 2018). It moves away from the traditional notion of academic judgment, instead guiding students through the process. For some students, synthesising written tasks can present a roadblock as they learn how to successfully link academic skills and apply them to produce a content-specific assessment. Additionally, feedback literacy is a learned skill, and varied interventions can support the development of this skill (Little et al., 2024). However, students frequently fail to engage with feedback on assessments and have little incentive to incorporate changes into already submitted and graded work. Students are therefore more likely to engage with feedforward practices and benefit more when given opportunities to implement suggestions, such as from academic tutors when engaging in a feedback dialogue (Teakel et al., 2024). Our previous research demonstrated that the provision of feedforward on a draft assessment in a one-on-one session with a discipline-specific tutor benefited all who engaged with the support. However, students with multiple equity factors were more likely to have improved outcomes (Teakel et al., 2024).

A well-designed curriculum has activities for students to engage with early in semester, such as an early assessment item due before census (Kift, 2015). Australian universities are required to have a census date that is a minimum of one quarter of the way through the semester. Prior to the census date, domestic students can withdraw from units without penalty. This first census date represents a critical juncture in the academic journey as universities can use this “pre-census window” to provide targeted support and advice. Interventions to support disengaged students should be carefully planned to ensure that they are timely, targeted and avoid over-communication. Ideally, the analytics that inform the outreach should also be explainable to students and provide students with the opportunity to make a well-informed decision to continue to study or to withdraw without penalty. Two models that have shown promise are monitoring student access to university systems and non-submission of assessment items. Nudges sent to students with no or low learning management system (LMS) activity have been shown to increase the engagement of at-risk students in their unit LMS sites and were found to be helpful by students (Lawrence et al., 2019). Monitoring the submission of early assessment items and providing targeted support to those who do not submit has also shown promise (Cox & Naylor, 2018) and emphasised the importance of early assessment items in the curriculum. In another study that compared the two models, non-submission of assessment items was shown to be more accurate in identifying students at risk of failing than low LMS activity (Linden et al., 2023). The fail rate was reduced in both groups of students if they had a phone conversation with university outreach staff (Linden et al., 2023). However, despite universities’ best efforts, some students remain enrolled past census, do not accept support, engage or submit assessments and receive a zero-fail¹ (Stephenson et al., 2021; van der Ploeg et al., 2024).

Recent legislation in Australia has increased the onus on universities to monitor student engagement, with the potential for large fines for allowing completely disengaged students to remain enrolled (Department of Education, 2021). It could be argued that a student with zero-fail grades is receiving very little value for their tuition fees, and once a student receives a zero-fail grade they are likely to drop out of university (Stephenson et al., 2021; van der Ploeg et al., 2024). Ideally, student engagement should be monitored at multiple time points early in the semester and students who appear disengaged through low LMS activity or non-submission of assessment should be provided with support to stay and succeed or withdraw from university without incurring a financial debt (van der Ploeg et al., 2024). Additionally, it is critical that those students who decide to remain enrolled are provided with targeted and timely support to help them to succeed. Student retention is often reported as “everyone’s business”. However, universities should avoid a narrow focus on increasing student retention without considering students’ personal circumstances.

This article outlines the components of the university-wide Transition Framework designed to unify academics and professional staff in supporting first-year undergraduate students. When developing the Framework, a key aim was to increase commencing student success by embedding principles of transition pedagogy throughout the first-year curriculum.

¹ Zero-fail: A completed unit attempt that resulted in a failing grade and a numeric mark of zero on a 0-100 scale (Stephenson et al., 2021). Stephenson et al. first suggested this definition but used the term “non-participating enrolment”. We have previously argued that “zero-fail” is a more appropriate term and encourage the sector to adopt this term, with Stephenson et al.’s original definition (van der Ploeg et al., 2024).

Development of the Transition Framework

This project took place at a large Australian, regional university with a high proportion of students from diverse backgrounds. In 2023, approximately 70% of students were enrolled online, approximately 70% were studying part-time and the most common pathway for undergraduate students was through vocational education training (33%). In total, 21% of students were from a low socioeconomic status (SES) background, 45% from a regional, rural or remote postcode and 4.8% of students were Australian First Nations. Historically, student success and retention at the University have been well below the Australian university average.

Overview of the Development of the Transition Framework

In 2017 and 2018, aspects of the Framework were piloted in a single faculty and in 2019 the project was expanded across all three faculties. Over this time, the whole-of-institution Transition Framework was designed, tested, evaluated, and refined over 21 action-research cycles. The Framework was co-developed with unit coordinators, educational designers, non-academic support staff and academic leadership.

Where practical, initiatives were available to all staff and students. However, where limitations on capacity existed, units were strategically selected to maximise the proportion of commencing undergraduate students with at least one unit monitored. Key to the success of the project, communication and collaboration with unit coordinators was consistently maintained. Clear communication with unit coordinators was a priority and they were provided with an overview of upcoming interventions and detailed unit, or discipline-specific outcomes post intervention. Where possible, work was automated to allow for efficiency and scaling. However, where automation would result in significant compromises to the scope or quality of the initiatives, it was not pursued. Ethics approval was received from the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Protocol No: H21170, H22085).

Before Semester

In the weeks leading up to the start of semester, several strategies were introduced to support students in the transition to university. These included providing resources and access to meaningful data for unit coordinators, unit development support for unit coordinators, and opportunities for upskilling academic staff, with a focus on teaching diverse student cohorts (Table 1).

Table 1

Overview of Transition Framework

Transition framework	
Before Semester	
Access to quality data	Codesign a dashboard with unit coordinators to provide easy access to unit-level demographic, enrolment and success data
Upskill academic staff	Run a series of professional development sessions with a specific focus on teaching first year diverse cohorts. Pay for sessional staff to attend
Unit development support	Share key elements of quality unit design and the development of a quality pre-census assessment task
Support repeating students	Encourage unit coordinators to phone and email repeating students with advice on how to succeed
Census campaign	
Early disengagement	Proactively email students with no LMS access in the first weeks of session
Targeted outreach of disengaged students	Coordinated communication campaign utilising SMS, phone calls and follow-up emails to students who have not submitted assessment items or have low LMS activity
Identify completely disengaged students	If a student remains disengaged and has a minimal chance of passing, cancel enrolment and backdate to pre-census
During semester	
Provide just-for-me assessment support	One-on-one draft assessment feedforward with a discipline-specific tutor
Timely support for students who failed an assessment item	Targeted outreach and embedded tutor bookings to review feedback and prepare for the next assessment

A key element of the Framework was providing access to quality data. At the beginning of each semester, a unit-level dashboard was provided to each unit coordinator to provide them with meaningful demographic and learning analytics specific for their cohort. The dashboard evolved to include student demographics, program level enrolments, common unit enrolment patterns (including previous year average pass rates for each course and enrolment patterns), grade distributions, student LMS activity and a list of students who were repeating the unit (Roman et al., 2022). Support was built into the dashboard, which demonstrated to unit coordinators how to use the dashboard in their unit. As an example, unit coordinators were encouraged to reach out to repeating students to provide early support. The data is linked to the University data warehouse and updated daily.

Another key element was unit development support. Prior to the start of semester, unit coordinators were sent information on developing quality early assessment items and were given the option of assistance to further develop units with the support of the project team and an educational designer. In 2023, seven units with an average number of 288 enrolled students (43-558) from Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Business and Bachelor of Education were selected for unit development. None of these units had previously received development support from the project team. The units had an average pass rate of 67% and each unit underwent a thorough analysis which included a review of the 2022 LMS site, student feedback from the end of semester unit survey results, student demographics and learning analytics, including assessment submission patterns. During this process the authors developed a list of where each of these units deviated from what the literature would suggest is best practice (Harrington et al., 2024; Kift, 2015; King-Sears et al., 2023). Examples include unclear assessment instructions, excessive weekly reading (100 pages or more) or insufficient weekly content and poor-quality resources. All seven units were lacking fundamental elements of quality online units. From this, a set of key elements of quality unit design were developed to ensure students received a consistent experience across their enrolment. The guidelines were heavily based on the literature including transition pedagogy, UDL and a pedagogy of kindness. They covered three main areas: inclusive unit delivery; scaffolding of content; and assessment for learning. Student focus groups were run with 50 students who were enrolled in the seven units to provide feedback on the unit design guidelines and the unit development more broadly.

Census Campaign

Student engagement was monitored at the beginning of each semester at three time points (Table 1).

Early disengagement email (n=9414 students). The LMS activity of all students in the university was monitored in week 2 of each of the 3 main teaching semesters. Any student who had not accessed the LMS since the first day of teaching for an enrolled unit was sent an email reminder that the semester has started.

Targeted outreach (n=3813 students; weeks 3 and 4). Each semester approximately 100 units with a high proportion of commencing students were identified and confirmed by Faculty and School leadership. These units were selected based on student enrolment patterns from the previous year and resulted in approximately 85-90% of all commencing undergraduate students having at least one unit monitored each semester. The remaining commencing students were dispersed over a large number of programs, were generally studying a single unit and were not following a normal enrolment pattern.

In weeks 3 and 4 student engagement was monitored in one of two ways. Where possible, the project team worked with the unit coordinator to develop and include an early assessment item due no later than the Wednesday of week 4. The team then worked with the unit coordinator the day after the assessment was due to identify students who had not submitted and who had not requested an extension via a custom-built web-app. This information was then passed on to the Student Outreach Team. If the unit did not have a pre-census assessment item, disengaged students were identified if they had low LMS activity, defined as not accessing the unit LMS site in the previous 10 days. Student details were then sent to the Student Outreach Team, who received training specifically aligned with the aims of the project. The Student Outreach Team were provided with contextual information about each student and contacted the students via phone, 2-way SMS and or email prior to census. The main reasons provided by students for non-submission of the assessment or not accessing the LMS along with the students' intended course of action were recorded.

Census grace period (n=616). Students who appeared completely disengaged were identified on the Monday following census using two criteria. Firstly, using LMS access alone, students from the week 2 list who had still not accessed the LMS since the first day of session for any enrolled units (over 4 weeks of no access). Secondly, students identified in the targeted outreach campaign who remained disengaged were identified due to a combination of factors, including if they had still not submitted an assessment item, no LMS access for 10 days (calculated in week 5) and a history of zero-fail grades as previously described (van der Ploeg et al., 2025). Disengaged students were sent an email and were asked to opt-in to continue studying by replying to an email and completing a study planner. Administratively, any enrolment changes were considered as pre-census date decisions. Therefore, students were provided extra time to clarify their census date enrolment choices and did not pay for

unenrolled units. The options outlined in the email included: taking a leave of absence, deferring, withdrawing from the course or reducing study load. The students who chose to continue were still considered at higher risk of failing and were directed to support services including prioritised one-on-one support with an embedded tutor. Students who did not reply to the email were put on a leave of absence, deferred, or withdrawn from their course.

During Semester

Discipline-specific embedded tutors were available in up to 50 units each semester that were also monitored for student engagement (Table 1). Embedded tutors were casual academic teaching staff available for one-on-one appointments to provide feedback or feedforward on a draft assessment in the 2-3 week lead-up to the due date at no cost to the student, with approximately 4000 appointments in 2023 (Teakel et al., 2024). Up to 20 percent of students enrolled in a unit engaged with an embedded tutor, which were booked in the LMS using an online booking system and were held online via Zoom. Students could book multiple appointments as required. A range of tutor times were available to students, including evenings and weekends. Tutors were provided with dedicated training sessions on a pedagogy of kindness, showing compassion and acceptance in providing academic support as well as how to use the technology. Tutors were also provided with information on the unit and assessment they were supporting and were paid to attend marking moderation meetings with the unit coordinator. The Embedded Tutor Program included targeted outreach and active referrals to tutor support post census. Students were identified as at-risk if they had previously attempted and failed the unit, if they received a fail grade, or a 'borderline pass' (55% or less) in an earlier assessment item, had low LMS activity, or had been identified by the unit coordinator as requiring additional support. Students, tutors, and unit coordinators were invited to participate in an interview to provide feedback on the Program.

Data Collection and Analysis

Due to the high-level analysis on the combined effect of all interventions without the presence of control groups, the evaluation was constrained to an observational methodology. Unit level success rate was calculated as students enrolled in the unit who received a passing grade *divided by* all students enrolled past census. University level domestic, undergraduate commencing student success rates for internal and online students from 2015 to 2023 were downloaded from curated university data sets. The equivalent sector average data was downloaded from the Australian Department of Education higher education statistics, 2023 student data attrition, success and retention (Department of Education, 2025). In the evaluation of the census campaign, student level success rates were calculated as the total number of passing grades *divided by* all substantive grades for each component of the intervention.

To evaluate the impact of the unit guidelines, student grades were downloaded from the LMS (Blackboard) grading platform (Grade Centre) in 2022 and 2023 and were matched to student equity factors stored in the University data warehouse (low SES; Rural Regional and Remote; Australian First Nations; students living with a disability; first-in-family to study at university).

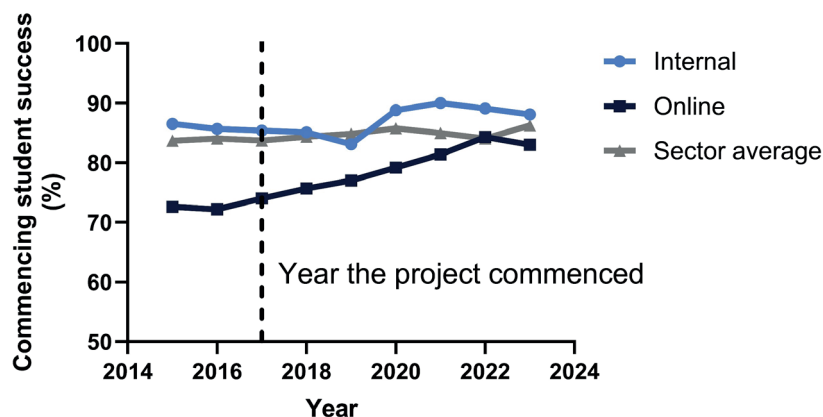
GraphPad Prism version 10.4.1 (GraphPad Software) was used for statistical tests and graphing. A Pearson's Chi-squared test was used to determine the statistical significance of the difference in grade distributions between students enrolled in 2022 and 2023. A 2 way ANOVA determined the statistical significance of the difference between low activity vs non-submission and dialogue vs non-dialogue in the week 3 to 4 targeted outreach. Statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

Findings

The components of the Transition Framework were tested and evaluated over an eight-year period and by 2023 a stable model was established. Since the project commenced in 2017, both internal and online commencing success rates have trended upwards and in 2022 both online and internal commencing success rate exceeded the sector average for the first time (Figure 1). At an institutional level, in 2021, success rates reached an all-time high of 90% for on-campus cohorts (5-year change of +4.3%), and in 2022 reached 84.3% for online students (5-year change of +10.3%; Figure 1).

Figure 1

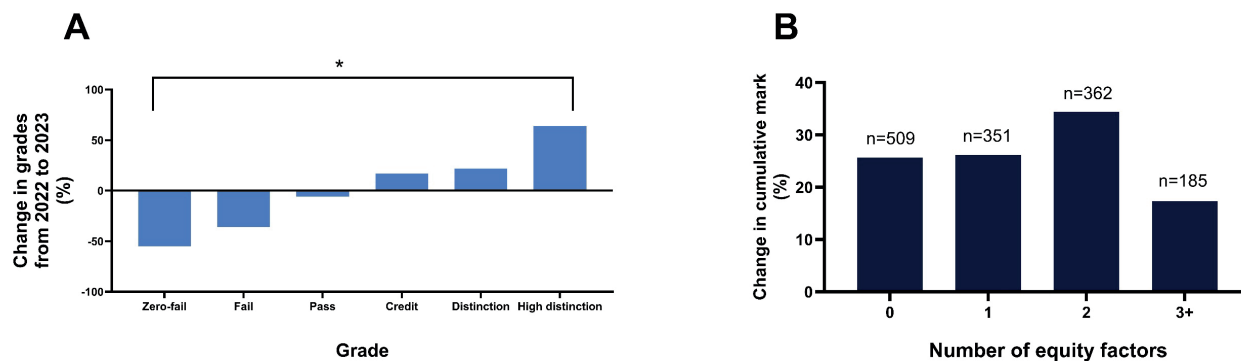
Average Annual Commencing Success Rate of Internal and Online Undergraduate Domestic Students Enrolled at our University and the Sector Average of Australian Universities



Across the 7 units that were redeveloped, the average success rate increased on average from 67% in 2022 to 85% in 2023; this 27% increase accounted for approximately 360 additional passing grades of the 2,019 students enrolled in the seven units. There was a decrease in the number of zero-fail, fail grades and an increase in the number of credit, distinction and high distinction grades (Figure 2A, $P < 0.05$). For the 509 students with no equity factors, the average cumulative mark for the unit (out of 100) increased by 26% while those with one, two or three equity factors saw an increase of 26%, 34% and 17%, respectively (Figure 2B).

Figure 2

A) *Change in Percentage of Grades from 2022 to 2023* and B) *Average Change in Cumulative Mark from 2022 to 2023 Based on the Number of Cumulative Equity Factors*

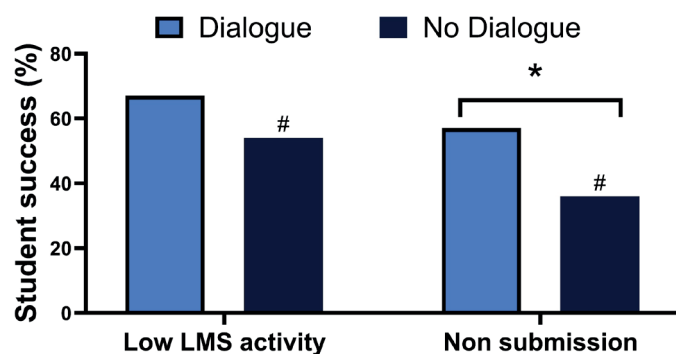


Note: *significantly different to grades in 2022 ($P < 0.05$).

In 2023, 9414 unique students were emailed due to early disengagement. A total of 3813 students who were enrolled in monitored units and identified as disengaged were provided with targeted outreach. Student success was significantly higher for the 48% of students who had dialogue with the outreach team due to either low LMS activity (67% success) or non-submission of assessment (57% success, Figure 3, $P < 0.05$). In total, 616 of these students remained disengaged after census and were provided a census grace period to which 400 students replied to an opt into study email; with 187 students completing a study planner and opting to continue to study. The remaining 429 students were unenrolled.

Figure 3

Dialogue with the Student Outreach Team Increased the Success Rate of Students with Targeted Outreach

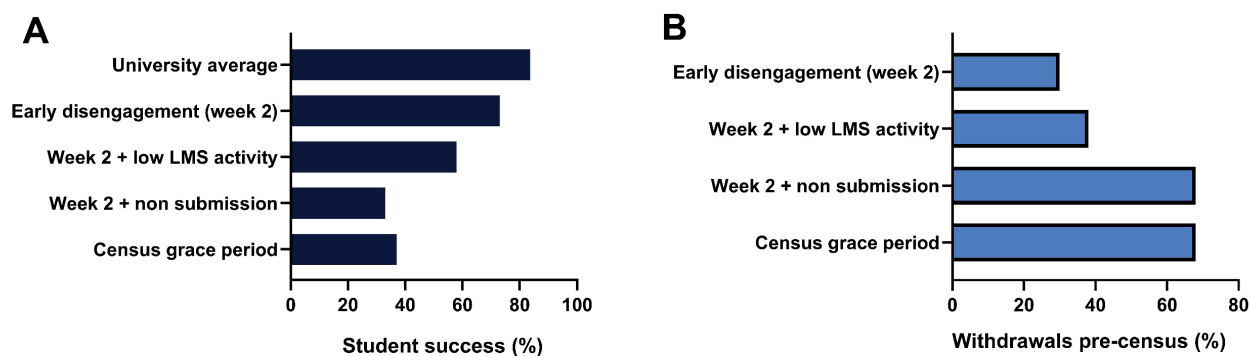


Note: *P<0.05 compared to low activity; # P<0.05 compared to dialogue.

Students who were contacted due to early disengagement had a success rate across all attempted units of 73%, 10 percentage points below the university average for commencing undergraduate students of 83%. However, if a student was emailed due to early disengagement and remained disengaged and identified through targeted outreach, the success rate was lower for students identified due to low activity (58%) or non-submission (33%; Figure 4A) than either of those interventions alone. The proportion of students contacted who decided to withdraw from study prior to census increased with each intervention (Figure 4B).

Figure 4

Census Interventions of Disengaged Students A) The Cumulative Effects of Pre -census Interventions on Student Success Rate and B) Proportion of Students Choosing to Withdraw Pre-census Following Contact



The Student Outreach Team recorded the outcome of successful phone calls due to targeted outreach from both missed assessments and low LMS activity (Table 2). During the calls, students were guided to seek support, how to reduce study load or to take a leave of absence. Unit coordinators were sent a summary of call outcomes following each campaign.

Table 2*Comments Following Targeted Outreach Phone Conversations with Students*

Making informed decisions	Preventing zero-fails	Engaging students
"Student is working full time and having a lot of trouble with managing a full-time study load too. He feels like he is staying on top of his other three subjects but for [subject name] he feels he does not have enough time to engage in it. He is going to withdraw from the unit before the census date (tomorrow) and pick it up again when he is ready."	"Student is not in fact aware that he was a student and didn't know that he had accepted an offer let alone, been enrolled in units. Sending an email regarding cancelling enrolment and declining offer after accepted, depending where he is at. Also briefed over the census date and told him to complete it before the 10th of August"	"Student has had surgery last week and didn't know that there was an assessment due. She is wishing to complete it and told her to contact her unit coordinator about it regarding special cons etc"
"Student has been busy moving house as well as starting a full time job. She has also been looking after her sick kid. She has realised that she will not be able to study two units this session so will be withdrawing from one."	"Student was not aware they were enrolled in any units after accepting offer. Follow up email sent with faculty information and unit withdrawal info."	"Student had forgotten to complete the quiz and is going to complete it ASAP."

We previously demonstrated in the evaluation of the 2022 Embedded Tutor Program that students who met with a tutor received 15% higher cumulative unit marks and reported increased confidence, overall learning and satisfaction than classmates who did not meet with a tutor (Teakel et al., 2024). In 2023, the Program had been significantly scaled up across the University and over 2,500 individual students met with a tutor in over 4,000 tutor sessions. The average success rate of students who met with a tutor was 88%; above the University average of 83%. In response to failed or missed assessments, 514 students across 25 first year units were contacted by the Student Outreach Team and provided with prioritised access to book a tutor session. The average success rate of the 87 students who booked a tutor session was 86% compared to 57% for those students who did not book a session. Students (n=10), tutors (n=10) and teaching academics (n=3) provided feedback in interviews that highlighted themes of confidence, kindness and support (Table 3).

Table 3*Positives Aspects of the Tutoring were Highlighted in Feedback from Students and Staff*

Students	Embedded tutors	Unit coordinators
"I was prompted because I was told by another student. 'Do not miss the opportunities to have an embedded tutor'. And this is my first time at uni, ever, so, I was quite nervous"	"The students are amazing. Just, you know, working with them and seeing them grow in their learning and saying that you are having an impact is very fulfilling"	"I like that students felt they had more than one resource, more than one place to go to for support"
"I like the connection that it gave me to the uni, you can feel a little bit isolated. It was very personal, and it felt they were they just for me. I think the whole experience is just wonderful."	"I like the opportunity to meet with students and really see them have those like, lightbulb moments, or get excited about learning or you know, when you see something click, that's really rewarding"	"I think it was a great program in all, and I think the students got a lot out of it"

Discussion

Here, we present the learnings of an eight-year project to develop a sustainable, whole-of-institution Transition Framework that provides support for both students and academic staff at key time points. It has been almost 20 years since the concept of transition pedagogy was first published, which has resulted in many initiatives to support first-year students. The Framework presented here is our interpretation, developed to meet the policy requirements within the Australian context as well as the needs of diverse student enrolments at our regional university. A key element to the success of the project has been the multifaceted approach and the genuine collaboration across the university.

Students transition to university from diverse backgrounds. A key aspect of an intentionally designed first-year curriculum, involves removing structural inequalities (Kift, 2009; Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). Over the duration of the project, unit development was a key component and each year we have shown increased student success in a small number of units. As an example, we reported unit success rates increasing from an average of 66% to 80% in 25 units in a single Faculty in 2018. It must be noted that this was also the first time the census campaigns provided targeted support in these units. As such, the reported 21% increase in pass mark cannot be attributed to unit development alone, which was a much earlier iteration to what is presented here (Linden & Webster, 2019). To improve the sustainability of the Framework, unit guidelines were developed as minimum expectations of what should be available to students in a unit. They were based on elements that we know students value, such as video explanations of assessments, clearly defined assessment rubrics and a consistency of layout of weekly

content in the LMS (Harrington et al., 2024). The minimum expectations were also based on the principles of UDL, promoting flexibility, clarity and consistency within a unit and across a students enrolment (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). In doing so, they aimed to remove structural inequalities across the first-year by including *just-in-time* and *just-for-me* access to critical information (Kift, 2009). The minimum expectations are now located centrally and inform unit development at our university.

In the seven large units that were redeveloped using these guidelines in 2023, there was an increase in the student success rate, and the number of students who received a zero-fail grade halved. We have shown previously that almost 80% of students who remain enrolled past census and receive a zero-fail grade access the LMS at least once in session, and more than half accessed the LMS in, or beyond the week of census (van der Ploeg et al., 2024). By removing barriers such as complicated assessment instructions or excessive weekly reading, students are more likely to engage in the learning material. Students have previously reported positive feedback when the LMS site outlines clear expectations (in both the assessment and the unit) and this is associated with improved educational outcomes (Harrington et al., 2024). Conversely, in a survey of students who had failed at university, the majority of institution-related comments focused on curriculum design, such as poorly designed learning activities, a lack of alignment between teaching activities and assessment design and the unit being inflexible or unengaging (Ajjawi et al., 2020). Other aspects of the framework had been implemented in these units for a number of years, including the census campaign and the Embedded Tutor Program, indicating that the changes reported here are due to the improvements in curriculum design. We propose that quality units across first-year are critical for a large impact on student success rate and other elements of the Transition Framework are more impactful once unit quality is addressed.

Students who fail have been shown to be four times less likely to return to study the following year (Ajjawi et al., 2020). It is not surprising that students view of failing units is negative, with responses to a survey including feelings of disappointment, stress and devastation. Students also reported frustration in having to pay the unit fees again to re-attempt failed units, and a lack of sympathy or concern from the university (Ajjawi et al., 2020). A key finding of this project is the importance of identifying disengaged students and providing targeted support at multiple time points early in the session to reduce the likelihood of failing. Up until census date, it is important to support students in making the right decisions. However, for our students who are completely disengaged after census, encouraging students to engage is not effective for most students, and for many, it may simply be too late to catch up. At times this means helping a student to recognise that reducing study load or taking a break from study might be in their best interest at that time. A nuanced approach that prioritises student well-being and informed decision-making is essential.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study is that the evaluation relies on retrospective observational analysis. This study does not provide proof of causation, given that many confounding variables exist when analysing whole-of-university interventions. The findings of this study are also specific to our large Australian regional university and may not generalise to students with different demographics or in different contexts. Finally, the sustainability of any large, institution-wide project is contingent on *ongoing* support from university leadership. University restructures can have a significant impact on projects, such as this Transition Framework. Given the size and complexity of universities, an *enduring* commitment to implementing transition pedagogy is required.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we know that failing is not good for the university or the student. Students need to feel seen and know that they matter. Kift and Nelson first proposed the concept of transition pedagogy almost 20 years ago and we propose that it is just as relevant in 2025 as it was 2005. A quality and inclusive curriculum and *just-in-time* and *just-for-me* support are critical as students transition to university and the synergistic frameworks of UDL and a pedagogy of kindness provide an element that was not included in Kift's first articulation. A small, but critically timed, gesture such as a phone call or one-on-one tutoring session can mean the difference between success and failure, particularly for equity students. We provide evidence that the Transition Framework has had a positive impact on student success, and institutional level commencing undergraduate student success rates have increased since this project commenced in 2017. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence that intentional, research-informed transition practices can drive measurable improvements in student success.

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