

“I Want to Feel That I Belong to This Place”: Helping Students Transition to University by Combining the Peregrination of Belonging with Transition Pedagogy

Trixie James

CQUniversity, Australia

Abstract

Equity students entering higher education through Enabling programs often encounter significant challenges as they transition into the academic field. This transition involves navigating the *hysteresis juncture*, a moment of misalignment between students' ingrained habitus and the expectations of the academic environment. This study explores the intersection of Kift's (2009) *Transition Pedagogy* and James' (2024) *Peregrination of Belonging* model, illustrating how Enabling program students navigate the complexities of higher education through both structured institutional support and deeply personal experiences of identity transformation. The findings emphasise that while academic scaffolding is crucial, it must be complemented by an understanding of students' social and emotional realities, as belonging is a prerequisite for academic success. Enabling programs offer more than just alternative pathways into higher education; they serve as transformative spaces where students renegotiate their identities, develop resilience, and build confidence. The study highlights key factors in the transition process, including misalignment and disorientation, negotiating new dispositions, transformative adaptation, and determined hope as a catalyst for change. It underscores the importance of strategic adaptation to academic demands and re-narrativisation as a means of identity transformation. This research contributes to ongoing discussions about transition pedagogy by advocating for holistic, student-centred approaches that enable equity students to thrive in higher education, ultimately enhancing retention, engagement, and self-efficacy.

Keywords: Transition pedagogy; belonging; equity students; Enabling programs; transition.

Introduction

Higher education institutions have increasingly prioritised widening participation, yet equity students continue to encounter significant barriers to success. Many enter university through Enabling programs¹ designed to provide alternative pathways to higher education (HE). However, despite these structured entry points, students often experience a profound sense of disorientation upon arrival, as their existing social, cultural, and academic dispositions may not align with university expectations. This moment of crisis, conceptualised as the *hysteresis juncture* (James, 2024), occurs when a student's habitus, deeply ingrained ways of thinking, being, and acting, collides with the unfamiliar demands of the field of university. Without adequate support, this misalignment can lead to feelings of exclusion, self-doubt, and disengagement, ultimately impacting retention and success.

¹ “Enabling” is capitalised in the context of enabling students and programs in Australia (NAEEA https://enablingeducators.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-Defining-Enabling-Education-docx5.11.2019_AB.pdf)



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To mitigate these challenges, institutions have adopted transition frameworks designed to scaffold students' academic and social integration. Kift's (2009) *Transition Pedagogy* is one of the most influential models in this space, advocating for a whole-of-institution, student-centred approach that embeds structured support within the curriculum that assists first-year students to become independent learners and navigate the expectations of university. However, while this model provides a critical framework for facilitating first-year student transitions into HE, this article argues that it is equally important to understand equity students' experiences at a deeper level, acknowledging the complex and iterative nature of their sense of belonging and identity transformation. This article presents the *Peregrination of Belonging* model (James, 2024) as a complementary framework that moves beyond structured transition support to explore the lived experiences of equity students. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) sociological concepts of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field*, the Peregrination of Belonging model traces the five stages that equity students undergo as they navigate their transition into HE through an Enabling program. The research question guiding this study is: How can Transition Pedagogy support the transition experiences of equity students as conceptualised through the Peregrination of Belonging model? This article therefore positions Transition Pedagogy as a necessary institutional framework while advocating for the Peregrination of Belonging as an essential complement that accounts for students lived experiences.

Literature Review

Equity in Higher Education

Equity students, as defined by the Australian Government, include individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional and remote areas, non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and those with disabilities (Pitman et al., 2014). These students are often classified as equity, non-traditional or under-represented. Factors such as socio-economic disadvantage, regional or rural origins, or first-in-family status, "produce" these classifications (Pitman et al., 2014), which then often require students to seek additional support to effectively navigate the complexities of HE. These groups have historically been underrepresented in HE due to systemic barriers limiting access to academic resources, social support, and clear pathways into university (Department of Education, 2023; Wheelahan, 2009). Many equity students experience intersecting challenges, including disability (Crawford et al., 2016), English language barriers (Crawford, 2014; Drury & Charles, 2016; Thomas, 2002), Indigenous identity (Hall, 2015), gender-related barriers (Braund et al., 2020, 2022; Johnston et al., 2018), and regional disadvantage (Crawford et al., 2016; Morrison & Cowley, 2017; Vandyke et al., 2012). Additionally, these students often report imposter syndrome (James, 2024) and low self-efficacy (Larsen & James, 2022), further complicating their transition into HE. Addressing these complexities is key to ensuring Enabling programs are effective in facilitating access and success.

The Role of Enabling Programs

Enabling programs advance equity in access to HE by providing free, equity-focused pathways that equip students with the skills needed to transition successfully into undergraduate study (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Willans & Seary, 2007). Defined by the Department of Education (2025) as courses designed to prepare students for HE, these programs encompass a range of pre-tertiary initiatives that develop both academic capacity and familiarity with university culture.

Also referred to as bridging, access, preparatory, or transitional programs, Enabling programs offer an alternative entry route for a diverse range of students to access university-level study (James, 2016; Pitman et al., 2016). Enabling programs act as a bridge to HE, creating opportunities for equity students who may otherwise be excluded due to systemic barriers such as socio-economic disadvantage, limited prior educational attainment, or underrepresentation in traditional academic pathways. These programs are designed to provide students with the foundational skills, confidence, and academic literacy required to transition successfully into undergraduate study. James et al. (2024) argue that Enabling programs represent a form of social innovation, directly addressing the "wicked problem" (Larsen & Emmett, 2021) of educational inequity through targeted interventions that adapt to the diverse needs of non-traditional students. By offering alternative pathways that counteract the limitations of traditional education systems, these programs play a critical role in advancing HE equity and promoting social justice.

However, despite initiatives aimed at widening participation, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds remain more likely to access and complete HE (Pitman, 2015), leaving equity students, those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds, on the margins and often unable to achieve the social mobility that education promises. Within this context, Enabling students represent a distinct cohort: they are typically individuals who do not meet traditional entry requirements for university and may face additional barriers such as interrupted schooling, limited academic preparation, or responsibilities outside of study, such as work or caregiving. While all Enabling students can be considered equity students, not all equity students participate in Enabling programs, making the distinction important for understanding program design and impact. To support these students, pedagogies of care (Motta & Bennett, 2018) are implemented within Enabling programs. These

pedagogies emphasise a holistic, student-centred approach that attends to students' academic, social, and emotional needs, fostering resilience, belonging, and engagement (Bennett et al., 2018). In Enabling programs, pedagogies of care are embedded throughout teaching, mentoring, and support practices, ensuring that students not only develop academic skills but also build confidence, agency, and a sense of belonging within the HE environment.

Student well-being plays a critical role in shaping attitudes, behaviours, and engagement in learning, with positive well-being fostering motivation and connection, while negative well-being can lead to disengagement and diminished academic performance (Zhoc et al., 2022). As highlighted by Kahu (2013), emotions such as frustration and anxiety often contribute to withdrawal from learning, reducing students' ability to remain motivated and actively participate in their studies. Willans and Seary (2007) highlight the importance of Enabling programs incorporating both academic skill development and personal growth strategies to establish a strong foundation for student success. Seary and Willans (2020) suggest that by embedding well-being within curriculum design, institutions can foster environments that promote resilience, engagement, and long-term academic success. Despite these insights, many Enabling students commence their studies with significant self-doubt regarding their ability to succeed (Nieuwoudt, 2021; Seary & Willans, 2020). This uncertainty can amplify their inner critic, triggering a complex emotional response that hinders confidence and overall wellbeing (Braund et al., 2022; James & Walters, 2020). Addressing these challenges through a holistic approach that integrates academic support with well-being initiatives is essential to ensuring Enabling students not only persist in their studies but also develop the confidence and skills needed for long-term success.

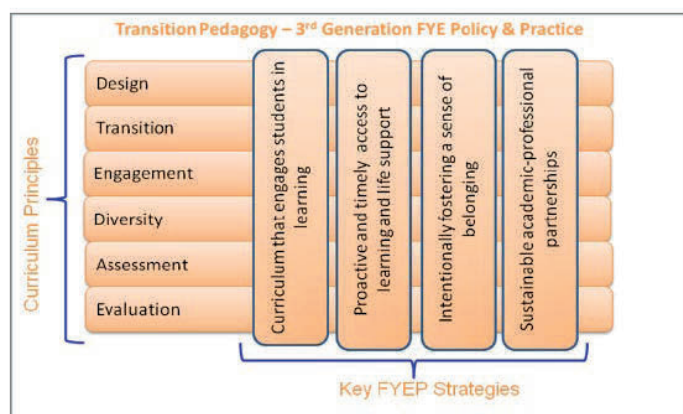
Equity students in Enabling programs face unique and intersecting challenges that impact their ability to transition successfully into university study. Research identifies several key barriers, including limited cultural and social capital, financial constraints, and psychosocial barriers. Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that confer advantage in a particular field. Many Enabling students lack access to the dominant cultural capital valued in academic settings, such as familiarity with academic writing conventions, research skills, and critical thinking practices. Similarly, social capital, or access to networks of support, is often limited, making it harder for these students to seek guidance and develop a sense of academic belonging (James, 2024). Financial constraints and external responsibilities, such as work and family commitments, often place additional stress on Enabling students, contributing to higher attrition rates among equity cohorts. Furthermore, many students entering Enabling programs carry a history of academic underachievement, which influences their self-efficacy and motivation (James, 2016). The transition into HE requires not only the acquisition of academic skills but also the development of a new learner identity. This aligns with the concept of re-narrativisation (James, 2024), wherein students reconstruct their academic self-concept through iterative experiences of success and engagement.

Transition Pedagogy and Student Success

Understanding student transition into HE requires both pedagogical and sociological perspectives. This study draws on Kift et al.'s (2010) Transition Pedagogy, which frames transition as a shared institutional responsibility embedded within curriculum design. The First Year Curriculum Principles, Transition, Engagement, Diversity, Design, Assessment, and Evaluation, provide a structured approach to student success by scaffolding cognitive, emotional, and social adaptation (Kift et al., 2010) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Transition Pedagogy - Conceptual Model (Kift et al. 2010)



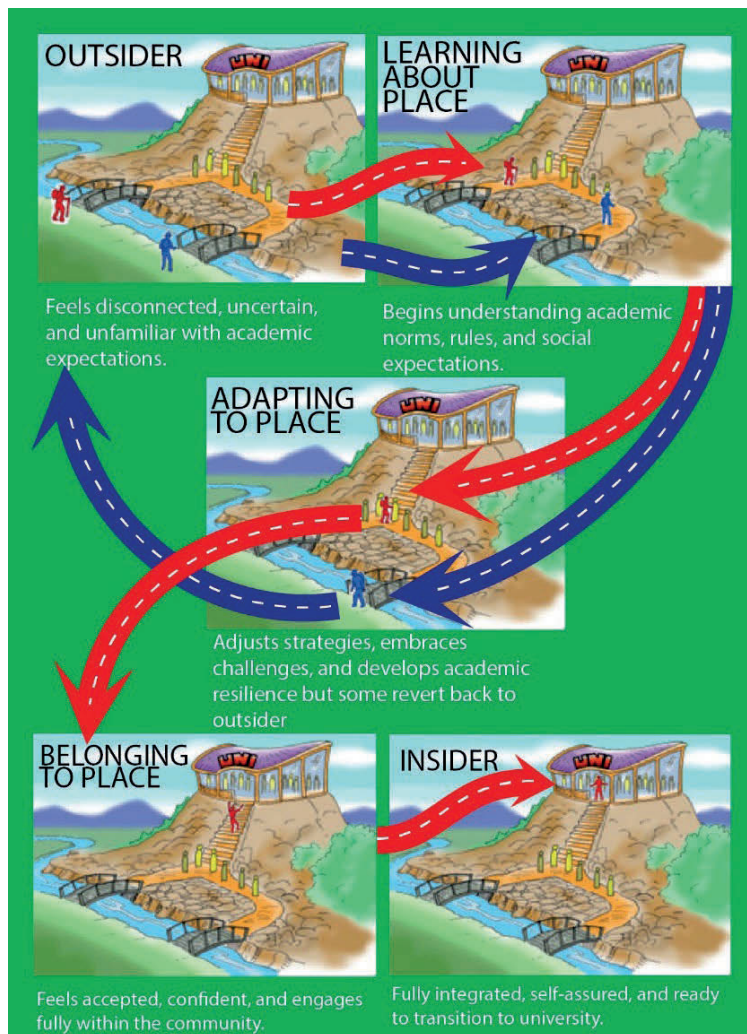
Kift (2015) identifies three key elements of transition pedagogy. First, it advocates for a structured curriculum approach that ensures consistency and quality throughout the student experience, providing clear guidance and support at each stage of their academic journey. Second, transition pedagogy emphasises a holistic, institution-wide commitment to fostering student engagement and belonging, encouraging all areas of the institution, academic and non-academic, to collaborate in creating a supportive and inclusive environment. This approach goes beyond individual academic interactions and focuses on cultivating a campus culture where students feel valued, connected, and supported. The third element is cross-institutional collaboration, where academic and professional staff work together to offer timely and personalised support, enhancing the overall learning experience. Unlike traditional transition models that often focus on individual deficits (Lawrence, 2005), such as a student's academic readiness or personal skills, transition pedagogy recognises the importance of addressing systemic barriers within the institution. It integrates support directly into the curriculum, treating it as an ongoing part of the educational experience, rather than an external intervention. This shift helps ensure that all students, particularly those from equity backgrounds, receive the guidance they need throughout their academic journey.

Recent findings challenge traditional transition pedagogy, which prioritises skill development as a means of fostering student belonging. Crawford et al. (2024) argue that connectivity, rather than academic skills alone, is more effective in supporting student integration. This aligns with the caring ethos evident in Enabling programs, which emphasise relationship-building alongside academic preparedness to create inclusive learning environments (Stokes, 2014). These programs use intentional curriculum design and pedagogies of care (Motta & Bennett, 2018) to foster critical dialogue, challenge limiting beliefs, and reinforce the importance of cultural capital (James & Walters, 2020; O'Neill et al., 2024). By embedding student-centred learning models that prioritise engagement, collaboration, and autonomy, Enabling programs ensure that social and emotional adjustment is recognised as integral to academic success.

Pedagogies of Care

Searly and Willans (2020) and Motta and Bennett (2018) highlight that Enabling programs are founded on a Pedagogy of Care, where educators intentionally foster a sense of belonging within the HE environment. According to James et al. (2022), this approach plays a crucial role in creating a supportive learning space, where educators build connections with students through emotional engagement. Their research suggests that by encouraging open dialogue and collegial interactions, a collective “we mentality” emerges, reinforcing feelings of acceptance, trust, and psychological safety (p. 17). This, in turn, empowers students to take emotional risks in their learning. Similarly, Searly and Willans (2020) argue that when educators prioritise relationality and demonstrate authentic care, they provide “safe opportunities” for students to challenge deficit narratives about their academic abilities, ultimately fostering resilience and confidence in their capacity to navigate university challenges (p. 19).

As this article's key focus is on Enabling students, it is essential to account for sociological factors that impact their capacity to easily transition into the field of HE. This study therefore applies Bourdieu's (1986) social reproduction theory to examine how the constructs of habitus, field, and capital shape the challenges faced by equity students in Enabling programs. The analysis is framed through the Peregrination of Belonging model developed by James (2024), which captures the transitional experiences of equity students as they navigate pre-tertiary programs and progress into HE. The term Peregrination of Belonging was chosen to capture the idea that students' journeys into HE are rarely straightforward; instead, they resemble a long, often winding path marked by detours, challenges, and moments of transformation, rather than a simple progression from point A to point B. James (2024) identified five distinct phases in this transition, *Outsider*, *Learning About Place*, *Adapting to Place*, *Belonging to Place*, and *Insider*, which illustrate students' evolving sense of belonging in HE (see Figure 2).

Figure 2*Peregrination of Belonging (James, 2024)*

This model is underpinned by Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1986) and applies key Bourdieusian concepts to examine the experiences of Enabling students as they progress through an Enabling program. Specifically, it explores how habitus, as well as social and cultural capital, shape students' beliefs about their ability to succeed in HE. Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained dispositions, beliefs, and ways of being that individuals develop through their social and cultural backgrounds (Webb et al., 2002). For students from non-traditional backgrounds, entering university often means encountering a misalignment between their existing habitus, formed by past educational experiences, family expectations, and socio-economic conditions, and the academic norms of the university environment (James, 2024). This misalignment can lead to the hysteresis effect, where students struggle to adapt their prior ways of thinking and behaving to meet new institutional expectations (Webb et al., 2002). Cultural capital, which includes knowledge, skills, and linguistic competencies valued within academic institutions, is often unequally distributed. Many equity students lack exposure to academic discourse, research conventions, and self-directed learning practices, placing them at an immediate disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986). Social capital, or access to networks of support, also plays a crucial role in student success. Equity students may enter university with limited social connections within academia, restricting their ability to seek guidance, build peer connections and have the confidence to seek help if needed (James, 2024).

Enabling and Social Mobility

Muia et al. (2023) argue that education provides the individual with resources that will increase their agency and voice and, by extension, their social participation and opportunities in life. Bourdieu's (1973) theory of social reproduction highlights how HE perpetuates existing social structures, often disadvantaging students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who lack dominant forms of cultural capital. Traditional university structures tend to assume a deficit model, where equity students are perceived as lacking the skills needed to succeed (Yosso, 2005). Further to this, Webb et al. (2002) argue that academic institutions operate with implicit "rules of the game" that privilege those familiar with these norms. Equity students often struggle to navigate these structures, experiencing exclusion and isolation (James, 2024). Enabling programs challenge these barriers by offering open-access, fee-free pathways designed to build students' academic capital (Bennett et al., 2018). These programs not only provide a critical bridge to HE but also empower students to recognise their capacity to undertake HE which contributes to their success and social mobility within the broader societal context.

Stokes (2014) emphasises the importance of developing pedagogies that help to address systemic oppression, arguing that these approaches challenge power imbalances and ensure that curricula meet the needs of equity students. By valuing students' prior knowledge and fostering self-efficacy, Enabling programs create spaces where students develop both academic competencies and confidence in their ability to succeed (Bennett et al., 2018). Research also suggests that holistic approaches integrating academic skill development with student wellbeing are critical in fostering success (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Willans & Seary, 2007). However, despite their success in promoting HE access, Enabling programs remain on the margins of the broader HE system. This marginalisation not only limits the systemic impact of Enabling programs but also reinforces feelings of exclusion among students, making a sense of belonging within the field of education even more critical for their engagement, persistence, and overall success (James, 2024).

The Importance of Belonging

A sense of belonging increases a student's sense of purpose and can be attributed to student success, particularly for those from equity backgrounds. Belonging refers to feeling valued, accepted, and connected within the university community (Allen et al., 2021; 2022). Furthermore, research suggests that there are many other benefits such as supporting academic motivation (Pedler et al., 2022), improving retention (Tinto, 2023), and strengthening students' academic identities (Komarraju & Dial, 2014). Institutional support and student engagement are key factors in fostering this sense of connection (Allen et al., 2022; Tinto, 2023). James (2024) clarifies this by demonstrating through the Peregrination of Belonging model that the sense of "belonging to place" is a critical step in students feeling that they belong to the field of academia which, in-turn, cultivates student agency. This is evident in the way that students utilise both "agentic possibility" and "agentic orientation" through exerting control over their learning environment and fostering behavioural patterns that allow their habitus to expand and develop a sense of agency (p. 204). By fostering this strong sense of belonging, universities can create more inclusive learning environments that empower equity students to navigate and thrive within the HE system.

Research Design and Methodology

The data used in this paper came from a larger case study from doctoral research (James, 2024). This study employed a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on Merriam's (1998) conceptualisation of case studies as an in-depth exploration of a bounded system. The bounded case is the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) Enabling Program located at CQUniversity, a large regional university in Australia. This program was chosen as the bounded case due to the large proportion of equity students enrolled. A case study approach was appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of students lived experiences, providing insights into how their habitus transformed through engagement with Enabling education and structured institutional support.

Positionality Statement

As an Enabling lecturer with a personal trajectory similar to the students in this study, I positioned myself as both an "insider" and an "outsider" (Chhabra, 2020). My experiences re-entering HE from a working-class background highlighted structural challenges, while my role as an educator positioned me with new social capital and authority. Adopting the stance of an "in-between" (Chhabra, 2020), I was able to navigate between nearness and distance, providing a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences while maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process.

Participants

The study participants were students enrolled in the CQUniversity STEPS Enabling program, which provides alternative pathways for those who may not have met traditional university entry requirements. Participants were selected through

purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of backgrounds, educational histories, and demographic characteristics. The sample included students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, first-in-family university attendees, mature-age learners, and those with prior negative educational experiences.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Mode of study	Employment	Identifies inequity category	First-in-family	Completed study plan
Dee	35-44	Female	Online	Working full-time	Yes	No	Yes
Nefrett	25-34	Female	Online	Working part-time	Yes	No	No
Caroline	45-54	Female	Online	Working full-time	Yes	No	No
Courtney	35-44	Female	Online	Working full-time	Yes	No	Yes
Cynthia	35-44	Female	Internal	Working part-time	Yes	Yes	No
Edward	55-64	Male	Internal	Government support benefits	Yes	Yes	Yes
Holly	18-24	Female	Internal	Not currently employed - living at home	Yes	No	Yes
Keeley	25-34	Female	Online	Working full-time	Yes	Yes	No
Michelle	25-34	Female	Internal	Working part-time	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rachel	35-44	Female	Online	Working part-time	Yes	Yes	Yes
Shelley	55-64	Female	Blended	Not currently employed	Yes	Yes	Yes
Valma	45-54	Female	Blended	Not currently employed	Yes	Yes	No
William	25-34	Male	Internal	Not currently employed	Yes	No	Yes

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their perceptions of transition, belonging, and academic identity development. Interviews were scheduled approximately fortnightly throughout each student's enrolment period; however, the exact number and timing of interviews varied according to individual circumstances. The graph below (Table 2) illustrates this schedule. The legend indicates the number of interviews conducted for each student across the terms: green represents the initial survey completed by all students, yellow indicates interviews conducted during the term. Areas shaded in grey indicate periods when interviews were not conducted. This occurred either because the student had already completed their study plan (e.g., Shelley and Edward) or because they had withdrawn from the study (e.g., Valma, Keeley, Cynthia, Caroline, William, and Nefrett). Most students participated in fortnightly interviews without issue. Rachel missed one interview due to her child's illness, while Courtney, Holly, and Michelle completed their interviews with the final end-of-term session, as this coincided with the conclusion of Term 3. The column on the right shows the outcome for each student, indicating whether they completed their personalised study plan or withdrew from their studies.

Table 2*Interview Schedule*

Psydonym	Pre-term Survey	Pre-Term Interview	Term 1 - 1	Term 1 - 2	Term 1 - 3	Term 1 - 4	End of term Int	Term 2 - 1	Term 2 - 2	Term 2 - 3	Term 2 - 4	End of term Int	Term 3 - 1	Term 3 - 2	Term 3 - 3	Term 3 - 4	End of term Int	Completed study Plan
Nefrett								Lost contact										No
Courtney																		Yes
Dee																		Yes
Holly																		Yes
Michelle																		Yes
Rachel																		Yes
Shelley																		Yes
William																		No
Caroline																		No
Cynthia																		No
Edward																		Yes
Keeley																		No
Valma																		No
Legend																		

In total, 121 interviews (from 30 minutes to 1 hour) were conducted. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method allowed for an iterative process of coding, categorising, and refining themes to capture the complexity of students' experiences. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis process, with researcher positionality acknowledged in interpreting participants' narratives.

As the article investigated both Kift's Transition Pedagogy and the Peregrination of Belonging model, coding was undertaken by identifying instances of institutional support, including references to curriculum design, approaches to student engagement, and cross-institutional support mechanisms. These codes were then mapped onto the five stages of Peregrination of Belonging: Outsider, Learning About Place, Adapting to Place, Belonging to Place, and Insider. Following coding, thematic analysis was conducted, resulting in the emergence of key themes. These themes form the analytical foundation for the findings and discussion sections.

Findings

The findings illustrate how Enabling students' experiences of transition are shaped by the interplay between structured institutional support and their evolving negotiation of academic and social identities. Analysis of the data revealed several key themes that capture this dynamic process. Students experienced *Misalignment and Disorientation* as they encountered unfamiliar academic and social expectations, followed by *Negotiating New Dispositions* as they adjusted to these challenges. *Transformative Adaptation* and *Determined Hope as a Catalyst for Change* highlight how students actively engaged with institutional support while sustaining motivation and resilience. The theme of *Strategic Adaptation to Academic Demands* reflects students' practical approaches to meeting course requirements, and *Re-narrativisation and Identity Transformation* underscores the profound ways in which their sense of self and belonging evolved throughout the transition. Together, these themes demonstrate that successful navigation of HE in Enabling programs relies not only on structured support mechanisms but also on students' ongoing negotiation of identity, agency, and belonging.

Misalignment and Disorientation

Many students entering Enabling education experience an initial sense of misalignment between their prior educational experiences and the expectations of university study. This disorientation often manifests as self-doubt, anxiety, and perceived inadequacy. Dee, for example, expressed deep-seated fears about belonging in an academic environment, stating, "I don't belong" (Term 1 (T1), Interview 1 (Int 1)). Her past experiences with education, particularly her struggles with mathematics due to prolonged absences in school, reinforced her belief that she was academically incapable. Similarly, Courtney, who had previously attempted two degrees but had not completed them, felt apprehensive about re-entering formal education, remarking, "There is a little bit of that fear there" (T1, Int 1). These narratives reflect the broader challenge faced by Enabling students, who must navigate an unfamiliar terrain that challenges their existing self-perceptions and educational dispositions. This sense of disorientation is further compounded by unfamiliar academic expectations and institutional structures. William, for instance, initially found university conventions alien and described his frustration with academic writing conventions, stating, "I didn't realise how much effort referencing and structuring arguments would take" (T1, Int 2). This highlights the

need for targeted academic support in early stages to bridge the gap between students' prior learning experiences and the demands of tertiary education.

Negotiating New Dispositions

Despite the initial misalignment, students begin to develop new dispositions towards learning, engaging in a process of cognitive and affective negotiation. For many, this involves grappling with unfamiliar academic conventions and reconfiguring their approach to study. Michelle, who had previously failed the pre-entry test for STEPS, described how she initially doubted her ability but gradually adopted a more confident outlook: "I felt a sense of insecurity in my ability, and I just wanted to go back to my own comfort zone, but I knew if I did that, I wouldn't realise my full potential" (T1, Int 1). Similarly, William, who identified as a "massive self-sabotager" (T1, Int 1), recognised the need to shift his mindset from avoidance to engagement, particularly as he encountered the demands of academic writing and structured assessments. The negotiation of these new dispositions is an essential step in the broader journey towards academic and personal transformation. A key factor in this shift is the presence of support structures that help students reframe their attitudes towards learning. Holly, for example, initially struggled to view herself as a capable university student but found that targeted feedback and encouragement helped her persist. She shared, "I started to believe that maybe I could actually do this" (T2, Int 3). This suggests that fostering student confidence through incremental successes can play a crucial role in shifting academic dispositions.

Transformative Adaptation

For many students, adaptation to university study is not merely about acquiring new skills but involves a deeper transformation of their academic identities. Holly, the youngest participant, initially approached university with a high school mindset, expecting structured guidance. However, as she progressed, she recognised the shift towards independent learning, stating, "I like that in university, you have to figure it out for yourself or go and research it" (T3, Int 5). This transition from dependency to self-directed learning illustrates the transformative adaptation that many Enabling students undergo. Similarly, Michelle, who had a history of educational struggles due to dyslexia, described how she moved from despair to achievement: "I looked at the book and cried... But here I am doing algebra" (T1, Int 1). This transformation is facilitated through both institutional support and the students' evolving sense of agency. This transformation is not always linear, with students often experiencing setbacks before consolidating their learning. Dee, for instance, found that even as she developed academic skills, she continued to struggle with confidence in formal settings. "Even when I know I've done well, I second-guess myself" (T2, Int 4). This highlights the importance of sustained encouragement and scaffolding to help students internalise their growing academic competencies.

Determined Hope as a Catalyst for Change

A recurring theme in the narratives is the role of hope and determination as key drivers of change. Dee, who initially questioned her place in academia, described how small academic successes reinforced her belief in her capabilities: "I just love essay writing now. I still find it challenging, but I'm really enjoying pushing myself" (T1, Int 3). Courtney, despite experiencing anxiety and past academic setbacks, demonstrated a clear vision for her future and an unwavering commitment to her studies: "I'm so passionate about what I want to do... it's a long road ahead, but I know I'm in the right place to succeed" (T1, Int 1). This theme underpins the importance of persistence and self-belief, with students actively reshaping their futures through a combination of resilience, external support, and internal motivation. This sense of hope is reinforced through peer networks and classroom environments that celebrate progress. Michelle recounted how hearing about other students' struggles and successes in class helped her to maintain perspective: "Knowing I wasn't the only one finding it hard made me realise I could keep going" (T2, Int 3). This suggests that creating spaces for shared reflection and community-building is instrumental in sustaining student motivation.

Strategic Adaptation to Academic Demands

Students also develop strategic approaches to managing academic challenges, often refining their study habits and organisational skills. Courtney, for instance, meticulously planned her workload, noting, "It's kind of just being conscious of your time and what you're trying to achieve" (T1, Int 1). Holly, despite struggling with prioritisation, eventually learned to balance her commitments, stating, "I know I'm capable to catch up. I feel comfortable with what I'm learning every week" (T3, Int 2). For some students, adaptation was also emotional and psychological. William, who experienced a significant setback when he received a lower-than-expected grade, initially reacted with discouragement but later reframed the experience as a learning opportunity: "It was a reality check... but I've got to keep going" (T1, Int 3). These strategies, whether organisational or cognitive, played a crucial role in Enabling students to persist and succeed in their studies. Many students also identified moments where they adjusted their expectations of themselves, focusing more on consistency rather than perfection. Dee, for example, shared that shifting her perspective from aiming for top marks to maintaining steady progress helped her manage stress more effectively: "It's not about being the best, it's about keeping going" (T3, Int 4).

Re-Narrativisation and Identity Transformation

Perhaps the most profound change experienced by Enabling students is the re-narrativisation of their academic and personal identities. Dee, who had long viewed herself as the “dumb one” in her family (T1, Int 1), gradually shed this perception, stating by the end of her studies, “I think now I’m actually quite intelligent” (T1, Int 4). Similarly, Michelle, who had carried deep insecurities about her learning difficulties, became an advocate for Enabling education, encouraging others from similar backgrounds to pursue study: “You need to get on and do a program like this because you will succeed” (T3, Int 2). For many, this transformation extends beyond the academic domain into their broader sense of self. Holly, for instance, reflected that she now felt more confident engaging in intellectual discussions, stating, “I actually feel like I have something valuable to contribute” (T3, Int 5). This suggests that the process of academic transformation also fosters wider personal growth.

Discussion

findings of this study highlight the complexity of student transitions in HE, particularly for equity students navigating Enabling programs. By examining these experiences through the dual lenses of TP and the Peregrination of Belonging, this paper underscores the necessity of a holistic, student-centred approach that acknowledges both structured academic interventions and the deeply personal, evolving nature of belonging.

Linking Findings to Transition Pedagogy

Transition pedagogy provides a structured framework that scaffolds student success through an institution-wide, integrated approach. The findings in this study align with several key principles of transition pedagogy, particularly in relation to curriculum design, student engagement, and ongoing assessment. Many participants in this study expressed initial misalignment with the expectations of HE, mirroring the challenges identified by Kift et al. (2010) in first-year students. The principle of *Transition* is particularly relevant, as it highlights the need for continual support beyond orientation programs. This study reinforces that student transition is not a one-time event but an iterative process, where students gradually adapt their habitus to the field of HE. Furthermore, the *Engagement* principle aligns with the necessity of fostering strong academic and social connections. As evidenced in the findings, peer support and institutional scaffolding played a crucial role in helping students negotiate new dispositions and develop academic confidence (James, 2024). The experiences of students such as Dee and Courtney illustrate that structured support mechanisms, such as embedded academic skills development and personalised feedback, are instrumental in reducing self-doubt and fostering resilience. However, while transition pedagogy offers a robust institutional framework, this study argues that it must be complemented by an understanding of students’ lived experiences, particularly in relation to the emotional and agency-based aspects of transition. The findings suggest that a rigid, skills-based approach alone is insufficient; students must also feel that they belong within the university environment, a dimension captured by the Peregrination of Belonging model.

The Peregrination of Belonging and Student Well-being

The Peregrination of Belonging model (James, 2024) complements transition pedagogy by tracing students’ evolving sense of belonging as they journey through HE. The findings of this study reinforce the notion that belonging is not an immediate or linear process but rather an ongoing negotiation influenced by personal, academic, and social factors (Crawford et al., 2024; James 2024). Students in this study articulated feelings of disorientation and self-doubt upon entry into the Enabling program, aligning with the *Outsider* and *Learning About Place* phases of the model (James, 2024). Over time, through the pedagogy of care and academic support, many progressed into the *Adapting to Place* and *Belonging to Place* phases, gradually internalising their identity as capable university students. However, James (2024) also found that the practical nature of study created a *cleft habitus* whereby the student’s habitus and dispositions are in turmoil with the expectations of the field of play. What became evident is that not all students were able to successfully adapt to these expectations and that there were varying reactions to the individual’s state of *hysteresis*. While some students were able to respond with the required capital to navigate this point of juncture, others encountered difficulties that resulted in feelings of despondency. In this phase, all students still experienced obstacles and barriers. However, some students continued to experience an *oppressive habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986) which magnified previous uncertainties, leading to a feeling of disconnect and heightened despondency regarding their ability to cope with their studies. Other students were able to draw on a *subversive habitus* which fuelled their hope through an elevated sense of resilience and perseverance (James, 2024).

One of the most significant findings is the role of emotional resilience and self-efficacy in student success. Participants such as Michelle and William highlighted how overcoming academic challenges and receiving validation from educators and peers led to an internal shift in their self-perception. This aligns with research on student well-being (Allen et al., 2022; Crawford et al., 2016) which suggests that fostering psychological safety and self-belief is as crucial as providing academic skill development (James & Walters, 2020; Walters & James, 2020). Kahu (2013) similarly emphasises that emotional engagement

plays a pivotal role in student persistence, reinforcing the argument that transition frameworks must integrate well-being considerations alongside academic interventions. The findings also demonstrate the importance of pedagogies of care in Enabling education (Motta & Bennett, 2018). The narratives of students who experienced self-doubt highlights the significance of relational pedagogies that centre care, empathy, and student agency (James, 2024). Educators who actively engaged with students, provided timely feedback, and fostered a sense of community played a crucial role in facilitating the transition from self-doubt to confidence.

Generalisation to a Larger Population

While this study focuses on Australian Enabling programs, the Peregrination of Belonging model holds broader relevance for HE globally. Equity students across international contexts face similar challenges of habitus misalignment, cultural capital disparities, and barriers to belonging (Ainscrow, 2020; Wanti et al., 2022). In countries such as the UK, Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand, where widening participation initiatives support non-traditional learners, this article offers insights into student transitions beyond Enabling programs and into first-year retention metrics. To maximise impact, the Peregrination of Belonging could be considered in tandem with transition pedagogy, ensuring structured academic support complements students' evolving sense of belonging. Transition pedagogy provides institutional scaffolding, while the Peregrination of Belonging captures the lived experience of student transformation, offering a holistic approach to retention and success.

The findings from this article could also inform transition strategies in vocational education and alternative learning pathways. Vocational learners, mature-age students, and those re-entering education often experience misalignment between prior experiences and academic expectations. By embedding identity transformation strategies alongside structured support, institutions can better facilitate student engagement and retention. Recognising the broader applicability of this approach highlights the need for integrated transition frameworks. Future research should explore cross-sectoral adaptations, examining how belonging and agency develop in varied educational and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study has explored the intersection of transition pedagogy and the Peregrination of Belonging, demonstrating that student transitions in Enabling programs are shaped by both structured institutional supports and deeply personal experiences of identity transformation. The findings reinforce that while structured curriculum and pedagogical interventions are vital, they must be complemented by an awareness of students' social and emotional realities. By integrating the Peregrination of Belonging within the framework of transition pedagogy, this article presents a comprehensive model for student success, one that not only scaffolds academic engagement but also prioritises well-being and belonging. The study highlights that Enabling programs are more than just alternative pathways into HE; they are transformative spaces where students renegotiate their identities, build confidence, and develop the resilience needed for long-term success. HE institutions must recognise that belonging is not a byproduct of academic success but a prerequisite for it. By embedding holistic, relational, and student-centred approaches into HE, universities can ensure that equity students do more than just access HE, they thrive within it.

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