

Towards a Holistic Model: Transition Pedagogy in High School Enabling Programs. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

The release of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report in 2024 and call for contextually relevant pathways to higher education continues the widening participation agenda that was introduced more than 50 years ago in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Enabling education continues to contribute to targets with the evolution of high school enabling programs. It is imperative, as the Accord suggests, that these programs support successful transition. Such programs thus require a pedagogical model for transition. This practice report adds to emerging research on high school enabling programs by exploring how an enabling transition pedagogy (ETP), an adaptation of Kift, Nelson and Clarke's third generation transition pedagogy, underpins two Australian embedded high school enabling programs to support student transition to higher education. It explores how the curriculum principles of the ETP (and intersecting strategies) are implemented within the two programs and suggests future directions for the model.

Keywords: High school; enabling education; enabling transition pedagogy; partnerships.

Introduction

The release of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report in 2024 (Department of Education, 2024) has rekindled focus on widening participation in Australian higher education (HE) with a particular focus on providing fit for purpose supportive pathways to tertiary study. Policies aimed at widening participation have included alternative entry pathways into university (Li & Jackson, 2024), and enabling programs are highlighted in the Accord Final Report as key to meet the Australian Government's targets. These programs prepare students with the academic skills necessary for university (Syme et al., 2021), and for students who achieved a lower Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) they can also build "confidence, resilience and ... purpose" (Jackson et al., 2023, p. 598-599). While enabling programs help students to transition to HE by offering valuable university acculturation experiences (MacLaurin et al., 2024), research suggests that non-ATAR school leavers face added challenges transitioning to bachelor degrees, and this disproportionately impacts students from equity groups (Olds et al., 2022). With an increased focus on the space between high school and university, there has been a rise Australia-wide of university enabling programs embedded in Year 11 and/or Year 12, to meet HE aspirations of students. The high school students undertaking embedded enabling programs whilst still at school, operate in a liminal or third space, which creates additional challenges. While ad hoc programs have connected universities with schools for over 20 years, there has been an increase in focused design, delivery, rigor and efficacy of embedded high school enabling program nationally across the sector in recent years.

Much has been written on Kift's Transition Pedagogy (TP) for supporting first year transition. However, research that uses the enabling transition pedagogy (an adaptation of Kift's TP) to strengthen the transition of enabling students, is in its infancy



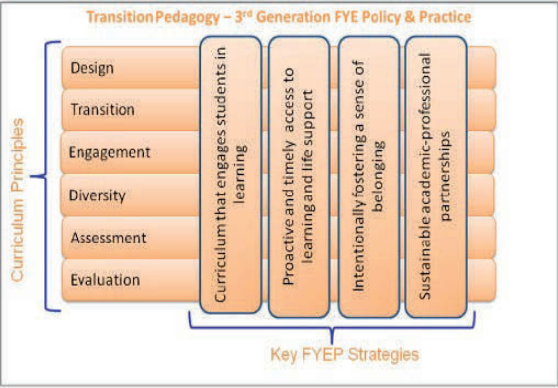
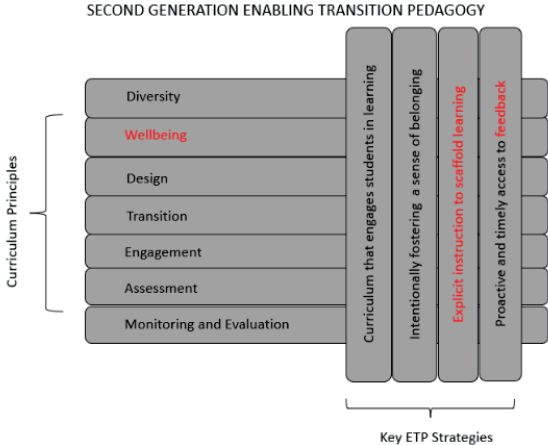
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(Jones et al., 2016; Lisciandro et al., 2023; Olds et al, 2022). This practice report adds to emerging research on high school enabling programs and explores the pedagogical underpinnings of two high school enabling programs. In this practice report, we use Second Generation Enabling Transition Pedagogy (ETP) to critically reflect on high school enabling programs from two Australian universities. This discussion frames the adapted ETP and contextualises high school enabling and the two programs. The report explores how the curriculum principles of ETP (and intersecting strategies) are implemented within the two programs, and suggests future directions for the model.

Enabling Transition Pedagogy

In Australia, TP (Kift, 2009) is a scaffolded approach to increase student success and enhance the first year learning experience. This approach consists of six first year curriculum principles: (1) Transition, (2) Diversity, (3) Design, (4) Engagement, (5) Assessment, and (6) Evaluation and Monitoring. Since its inception in 2009, TP has been validated as a comprehensive and integrated approach (Kift et al., 2010; Kift, 2015). Importantly, third generation approaches (see Figure 1) are becoming commonplace as TP matures. TP’s partnership strategies can facilitate student success and satisfaction, as students are supported during multiple transitions in, through, and out of HE (Kift, 2015).

Students experience many periods of transition throughout their higher education (HE) journey. Some of these transition periods are on a micro-scale (e.g., receiving feedback on a first summative piece of work, submitting a first assignment), some are on a macro-scale (e.g., moving between years of study, joining a new seminar group) (Wilson et al., 2022) and some can even be on what we term a “mega-scale” (e.g., relocating from home to a new city to start a new course of study, returning from a placement year or year abroad). How students anticipate, experience and respond to these different transition periods is underpinned by their previous experiences and how these have shaped their education capital or academic self-efficacy (Richardson et al., 2012), support systems (Kralik et al., 2006) and their social capital through establishing a sense of belonging to their HE community (Hausmann et al., 2009; Neves et al., 2019).

Figure 1 <i>Kift, Nelson & Clarke’s (2010) Transition Pedagogy: Third Generation FYE Policy and Practice</i>	Figure 2 <i>Second Generation Enabling Transition Pedagogy (Olds et al., 2022), Adapted from Kift, Nelson & Clarke’s (2010) Transition Pedagogy: Third generation FYE Policy and Practice</i>
	

Recognising the strength of TP and drawing on the work of Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010); Jones, Olds and Lisciandro modified the model in 2016 as an enabling transition pedagogy (ETP). With their knowledge that enabling cohorts commence with a unique set of challenges, this adaptation retained, but reordered the TPs six curriculum principles to prioritise “diversity”. With an enabling lens, the pedagogical strategies were reduced from four to three: Curriculum that engages students in learning; Intentionally fostering a sense of belonging; and Proactive and timely access to learning support. In 2022 the ETP adapted model was revised “to meet the diverse needs of emerging enabling cohorts” (Olds et al., 2022) and support their mental health, as these cohorts often experience high levels of psychological distress (Crawford et al., 2016; Nieuwoudt, 2021). Figure 2 shows that this revised ETP added “Wellbeing” as curriculum principle, as well as a fourth strategy of “Explicit instruction to scaffold learning”. “Proactive and timely access to learning support” was also changed to “Proactive and timely access to feedback”, recognising the importance of feedback in building enabling students’ academic self-efficacy to support transition into HE. Support is not specified in one strategy as it is an intrinsic element in all four strategies and six principles (Olds et al., 2022).

High School Enabling Programs

Australian high school enabling programs are like standard enabling programs, but students can complete the programs while in high school. These programs are becoming increasingly important for widening participation in HE. The programs provide a pathway to university for students who may not have selected the university-bound path early in their school journey, or would not flourish on an ATAR pathway (Jeong et al., 2024; Olds et al., 2022). While some high school enabling programs are delivered at a university campus after school hours or during school holidays, the majority of high school enabling programs are delivered by school teachers during school time. In this “partnership model” the programs are designed by university enabling academics, who work closely with partnership schools to coordinate, facilitate, and deliver the enabling programs to current Year 11 and/or Year 12 students. The programs provide a direct and supportive pathway to HE, increasing students’ aspirations to attend university, and equip students with the academic skills and confidence for a successful transition to university. In this practice report, we focus on Southern Cross University’s UniStart for Schools program and Edith Cowan University’s UniPrep Schools program, which are structured as partnership models.

UniStart for Schools is a fee-free enabling program that prepares high school students (in Year 12) for the rigours of university study, and aims to increase school-leaver transition to university. The program consists of one unit that is 15-weeks in duration (120 hours of study) and is delivered during school terms 2 and 3 at partnership high schools in the states of New South Wales and Queensland. The unit is delivered during school hours by a classroom teacher. The unit introduces students to the culture of academic enquiry and the conventions of written communication at university, while learning how to balance competing commitments. The unit is recognised by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority as a course of study to be delivered within high schools. The unit is eligible to contribute credit (1) to the Queensland Certificate of Education, but does not contribute credit to the New South Wales Higher School Certificate. It does not contribute to ATAR.

UniPrep Schools (C72) is a School Curriculum and Standards Authority endorsed pathway program delivered within partnership metropolitan and regional high schools in Western Australia to increase school-leaver transition to university. The goal of UniPrep Schools is to widen participation and success in HE particularly for equity cohorts. In 2025 this partnership model has seen UniPrep Schools service 38 secondary schools. UniPrep Schools consists of four units: Future Ready Skills, Academic Literacies, Society and Cultural Studies and Mathematics, delivered across a full year (Year 12) or two years (Year 11 and 12). The program can contribute 4-unit equivalent credits towards the Western Australian Certificate of Education. It does not contribute to ATAR.

Both programs are structured as partnership models, where the respective university enabling academics design the programs, including the structure, curriculum and assessments. The unit(s) are embedded in the school term timetable of partnership schools. The program is taught by trained teachers in the schools, and university academics are responsible for moderation and quality assurance.

Second Generation Enabling Transition Pedagogy in High School Enabling Programs

Early findings indicate that high school enabling programs designed with thoughtful consideration of the ETP can successfully prepare students for HE by increasing their academic skills and fostering student growth and a sense of belonging (Olds et al., 2022). Below, we introduce each of the curriculum principles of ETP; and explore how each principle is contextualised within the UniStart for Schools and UniPrep Schools high school enabling programs.

Diversity

High school enabling programs are typically designed for students who are not flourishing in ATAR curriculums (Olds et al., 2022). It could be argued that high school status and the shared goal of studying at university creates a level of homogeneity; however, this cohort shares similarities of equity and first-in-family (or first generation) status with standard enabling cohorts (Olds et al., 2022). Additionally, some students may face educational disadvantage due to school location, subject availability, non-selection of ATAR (by the school) or a medical condition impacting on ATAR completion. Kift's TP notes that "the first-year curriculum should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students ... Diversity is often a factor that further exacerbates transition difficulties" (2009, p. 41). The ETP prioritises diversity as a principle due to heterogeneity of enabling cohorts, of whom approximately 50% belong to one or more equity groups (Lisciandro, 2022; Syme et al., 2021). Meeting the needs of these students is difficult due to their "varied educational backgrounds, goals, interests, and motivations", which is compounded by the "diverse demographic, personal, and emotional" characteristics of the cohort (Jones et al., 2016, p. 23). UniPrep Schools students commence the program in Year 11 or 12, and students in UniStart for Schools commence in Year 12. There is variance in study path with some students completing ATAR subjects, VET courses, a combination or general pathway. Both programs' curriculums are designed to support students with diverse needs, without making assumptions of knowledge beyond their current educational attainment. Targeting underrepresented groups is a significant focus for UniPrep Schools. It is only available to students from a partnership school who are also: Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, first-in-family to attend university, on Centrelink¹ income support, a person with disability or facing challenges in reaching educational potential. MacLaurin et al. note that this equity cohort faces "enduring barriers when transitioning into university" (2024, p. 7), thus it is imperative that programs are designed to support diverse needs. Both programs demonstrate inclusive pedagogies through differentiated instruction, multiple ways of presenting information, varied assessment, and activities to develop cultural awareness. They also provide accessible learning technologies and educational experiences ensuring all learning material contains explicit instruction, is accessible by screen readers (and UniPrep Schools by braille readers) and provide access to captioning.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing was a new addition to the ETP as a curriculum principle, as Olds et al. (2022) among others recognising the growing need to support the mental health of enabling cohorts (e.g., Crawford et al., 2016; Nieuwoudt, 2021, 2023). As a curriculum principle, it is the consideration of curriculum inclusions that consider the social and emotional layers of learning. Like other enabling programs, the curriculum of high school enabling programs are grounded in theories of social and emotional development or learning (Lisciandro et al., 2022). Olds et al. (2022) suggest to enact the Wellbeing principle curriculum must embed social and emotional learning, "from lectures on grit, social and emotional intelligence, questionnaires on growth mindset, to the use of growth mindset language in all teaching materials" (p. 4). UniPrep Schools contextualises, and fosters, social and emotional development. This is developed through units such as in Future Ready skills, a metacognitive academic skills unit where the curriculum is designed so that in addition to academic skills development, the student is thinking about thinking, reflecting on reflecting, moving the student through reflecting: on themselves as a learner, academic skills, the future, and working relationships. Aligned with the ETP, the unit teaches the development of growth mindset as an important part of reflection, lifelong learning and career. Similarly, in UniStart for Schools growth mindset language is used in all teaching materials. Learning experiences, in-class and in self-access online modules, are designed to foster a growth mindset. Through project-based learning, students are provided with opportunities to push themselves. The school provides a supportive and nurturing environment in which students' skills are developed, and a growth mindset is fostered. Positive self-talk is encouraged to support students' social-emotional growth.

Design

Kift argues that first year curriculum TP design should be student-centred, clear, relevant, and scaffold the transition to university (Kift, 2009). Of the ETP, Lisciandro et al. (2023) note that:

within the enabling space, because it is more than an exercise in content acquisition, there is a conscious design intention dictating that the curriculum must serve multiple purposes, such as to address LO [learning outcome] as well as the implicit or hidden goals of enabling education. (p. 9)

In line with the TP and ETP design curriculum principle, high school enabling programs support students' learning by scaffolding foundational skills and knowledge. The UniStart for Schools' curriculum was designed to deliver a highly scaffolded program. The learning outcomes are aligned with assessments, and foundational skills are developed through

¹ Centrelink is a part of [Services Australia](#), an Australian government agency, that delivers social security payments and services to Australians

scaffolded assessments and timely feedback. The content in the self-access online modules is aligned with the assessments and with the classes. Through intentional curriculum design, students are introduced to the culture of academic enquiry and the conventions of written communication at university, while they learn how to balance competing commitments. This program develops students' understanding and skills in critical thinking and analysis, academic reading, academic writing, academic integrity, information literacy, research and self-management skills, providing a foundation and necessary skills for first year university learning success. Similarly, the curriculum of UniPrep Schools is scaffolded to build on students existing knowledge and skills, as well as self-efficacy. This involves a scaffolding of complexity through the program moving from foundational elements of learning in the first unit to more complex conceptual understandings in the latter units. Explicit study guides, templates and examples are designed with intentionality to support students with this progressive transitional journey. Additionally, UniPrep Schools enacts the ETP strategies as the curriculum scaffolds the teaching delivery, assessment, student support and provides the teachers with effective feedback strategies to support students to successfully complete the program and transition to university (Jones et al., 2016; Olds et al. 2022).

Transition

The transition curriculum principle recognises that the first-year curriculum and delivery should be focussed on the endeavour of progressing students from previous educational experiences to university broadly and their field of study (Kift, 2009). Traditional enabling students, however, are in a transitional space from non-university to pre-university before finally progressing to the first year of university. This additional transitional step, for students with complex educational histories and realities, may include the building of not just academic skills and understanding of university systems, but cultural capital and self-efficacy (Lisciandro et al., 2023). High school enabling students exist in a liminal or third space of in-betweenness as they are an enabling student as well as a school student, highlighting the importance of designing for complex transition. High school enabling programs can help students transition from secondary to tertiary education, and these programs aim to reduce the time it takes to settle into university when transition from high school to university (Olds et al., 2022). The curriculums of UniStart for Schools and UniPrep Schools has been designed to prepare senior high school students for tertiary study and to learn about university expectations. Briggs et al. (2012) explains that the formation of a HE learner identity is crucial for academic success and can be fostered early when schools and universities work together to help students transition to university study. The curriculum is designed to assist students with the transition into HE. Students are introduced to a range of learning and teaching activities as well as resources that they will encounter in their first year of university. The students are enrolled as university students at the respective HE institution, with a university student ID and student email address. The unit content and all resources are available through the university's learning management system (LMS), ensuring students are familiar with the university's online environment before starting their undergraduate studies. Through the program, students are introduced to university life and are provided on-campus experience days, where workshops and presentations are facilitated by university staff. Students become familiar with the university environment and its facilities, and the campus visits foster a sense of belonging.

Engagement

According to TP, first year "curriculum should enact an engaging and involving curriculum pedagogy and should enable active and collaborative learning", which the ETP is also aligned to (Kift, 2009, p. 41). Lisciandro et al. (2023) note that consideration should be given to different enabling cohorts and modes as the best ways to engage these students between cohorts can differ. UniStart for Schools and UniPrep Schools share similar engagement strategies in curriculum choices and delivery to foster a sense of belonging. In UniStart for Schools, engagement is structured using interactive, self-access online learning modules and cumulative assessments which are carefully scaffolded. Through project-based learning, students learn by actively engaging in authentic real-world projects. Similarly, UniPrep Schools provides transformative educational experiencing by designing curriculum and activities focussed on real world relevance. Throughout the program students are immersed in curriculum that is centred around contemporary challenges, concepts and technologies and are invited to reflect and engage with their social responsibilities. This is recognised in modules on the ethical use of artificial intelligence, building professional relationships and the importance of community and transferable skills for the workplace in Future Ready Skills. In Society and Cultural Studies students are asked to critically reflect on core topics such as philosophy and ethics, politics and gender, language and identity, cultural awareness, and diversity and inclusion. Focussing on the individual student, their social responsibility and the impact of their career in the world, fosters deep engagement with the units as the students can see the relevance to them. In both programs students actively participate and evaluate information as per active learning pedagogy, rather than passively consuming information delivered by teachers.

Assessment

Kift notes that first year assessment design "should increase in complexity from the first to later years of curriculum design" to support transition into HE (2009, p. 41). Like other enabling programs, the curriculum of high school enabling programs

are designed to assist students to make a smooth and successful transition from assessment in secondary to tertiary education, which requires a scaffolded approach (Lisciandro et al., 2023). Scaffolding assessments from low stakes to higher complexity, together with “explicit instruction” and “proactive and timely access to feedback” (Olds et al., 2022, p. 5) can promote small wins for students. This can build self-efficacy, especially as these students are still studying in a school environment, which may have contributed to a lack of confidence toward learning and belief in their academic ability. Both UniStart for Schools and UniPrep Schools share similarities with other high school enabling programs such as FlexiTrack High which “is heavily scaffolded, with each assessment preparing the student for larger assessments in later modules. This is to purposely create multiple opportunities for mini mastery, learning experiences vital for building self-efficacy” (Olds et al., 2022, p. 5). Assessments are student-centred, similar to the curriculum and unit(s), are scaffolded in complexity from early “small win” assessments to more complex assessments where early and regular feedback is provided to students in explicit rubrics on the LMS and can be discussed (informally) with the teacher for clarification. In alignment with the ETP, early assessments are used to gauge student level and provide early feedforward/feedback opportunities, so students can monitor their own progress and understand the areas to develop. Assessments throughout the units are consciously “chunked” to scaffold the skill development and provide timely feedback, so students can apply it to the next assessment which increases in complexity.

Evaluation and Monitoring

Both the TP and ETP recognise the importance of evaluation and monitoring. When designing high school enabling curriculum, consideration needs to be given to monitoring students to ensure that students are meeting unit learning outcomes, program learning outcomes and the ultimate goal of progressing and transitioning to university (Jones et al., 2016; Lisciandro et al., 2023; Olds et al., 2022). Kift notes that “first year curriculum should also have strategies embedded to monitor all students’ engagement in their learning and to identify and intervene in a timely way with students at risk of not succeeding or fully achieving desired learning outcomes” (2009, p. 41). The TP also notes that evidence-based evaluation strategies can ensure that curriculum remains relevant and renewed when necessary to maintain surety of learning. Consistent with the curriculum principle of evaluation and monitoring, evaluation of the curriculums of UniStart for Schools and UniPrep Schools occurs yearly using feedback tools, including student surveys and teacher feedback sessions. Recognising the importance of evaluation, UniPrep Schools and UniStart for Schools participates in yearly unit reviews. UniStart in Schools and UniPrep Schools works closely with the teachers and schools to monitor student progression in “a timely way” to provide the teacher and student with adequate resources to support successful completion of the program. Student progression is monitored through scaffolded assessments, as Olds et al. note “the nature of scaffolding allows for a constant cycle of communicating progress to inform learning” (2022, p. 5).

Discussion and Conclusion

This practice report demonstrates how the ETP (a modified version of the TP) curriculum principles and strategies are enacted in two high school enabling programs. The curriculums of the high school programs are designed by university enabling educators, and the programs are typically delivered by high school teachers to Year 11 and/or Year 12 students alongside their school subjects. As noted by Olds et al. (2022), the ETP-inspired curriculums of high school enabling programs stands in contrast to ATAR curriculums in terms of design and implementation. This is particularly noticeable with the inclusion of wellbeing strategies to support social emotional aspects of learning, which are then embedded in scaffolded curriculum, assessment and monitoring.

Where high school enabling programs deviate from the ETP is in the strategies. The needs of this enabling cohort necessitate strong partnerships and connections between universities and schools. The university and school work together to provide “... a highly supportive, pedagogically rigorous bridge to acculturation” (Olds et al., 2022, p. 3). This partnership can enhance academic success at school and university (Hughes & Brown, 2014). Furthermore, the university and schools work in feedback loops to continually improve the programs to successfully transition students from high school to university (Tenakov & Attree, 2023). High school enabling programs build valuable relationships with school communities (Olds et al., 2022).

We conclude that ETP curriculum principles are strongly aligned with designing supportive, scaffolded and rigorous high school enabling programs. The ETP, as a modified version of the TP, is a useful tool for auditing high school enabling program curriculum to ensure they are underpinned by principles that support the transition of high school students to university. However, the success of high school enabling programs is built on strong partnerships and connections between universities and schools. Thus, for high school enabling programs a modified version of the TP’s strategy of Sustainable Academic-Professional Partnerships needs to be included in a holistic ETP that considers all stakeholders in the third space of high school enabling programs. We propose that the ETP needs to incorporate a partnership strategy to create a holistic model for high school enabling programs. Furthermore, we recommend that wellbeing is included in TP as a curriculum principle to support the mental health of university students.

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Please cite this practice report as:

Nieuwoudt, J. E., Jones, A. (2025). Towards a holistic model: Transition pedagogy in high school enabling programs. A practice report. *Student Success*, 16(3), 114-121. <https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3774>

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