

Guest Editorial

A Generation of Transition Pedagogy: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Abstract

Transition pedagogy, introduced through Sally Kift's Australian Learning and Teaching Council Fellowship nearly 20 years ago, has profoundly influenced higher education by addressing student transitions. Grounded in inclusive curriculum design, whole-of-institution approaches, and academic-professional partnerships, transition pedagogy remains a cornerstone for fostering student success. This editorial reflects on the origins and evolution of transition pedagogy, evaluates its current applications and challenges, and explores its future potential in higher education via posing some provocations for research and practice reports. Transition pedagogy supports diverse student cohorts across the lifecycle, strongly rooted in socio-ecological frameworks. However, operational complexity and tokenistic implementation remain critical challenges. As transition pedagogy evolves, its mutability and focus on inclusive curriculum design position it to address emerging pathways. Transition remains "everybody's business."

2025 Special Issue: A Generation of Transition Pedagogy: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Introduction

As Sally Kift's Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Fellowship approaches its 20th anniversary, it is an opportune moment to reflect on the evolution and enduring impact of transition pedagogy in reshaping student transitions in higher education. Transition pedagogy, first conceptualised in 2005 (Kift & Nelson, 2005), represents a holistic, curriculum-centric approach to supporting students' diverse academic, social, and personal needs across critical transition points, particularly the first year of study. Malcolm Tight (2018) observed that key theoretical frameworks in higher education rarely emerge from higher education itself; rather, they are typically applied to the field from related disciplines such as psychology and sociology. In this, transition pedagogy has bucked the trend; not only is it profoundly based in the realities and practices of higher education, its groundedness in those realities has made it particularly influential. A *Google Scholar* search (5 September, 2025) for "Kift transition pedagogy" identifies nearly 3,000 articles, with the four foundational articles (Kift, 2009, 2015; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift et al., 2010) cited over 1800 times in total.

This guest editorial for this special issue explores the origins, evolution, critiques, and influence of transition pedagogy on higher education, highlighting its contributions while addressing areas of debate about its feasibility and impact. Through this reflection, transition pedagogy emerges not only as a critical intervention for student transitions but also as an adaptable framework for tackling modern challenges such as equity, mental health, and employability.



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Core Tenets of Transition Pedagogy

At its heart, transition pedagogy acknowledges that students bring diverse backgrounds, skills, and challenges to higher education. Rather than problematising diversity or adopting a deficit approach, transition pedagogy focuses on leveraging students' existing strengths, cultural capital, and aspirations to foster learning engagement and success (Kift, 2023; Kift et al., 2010;). This framework encapsulates several defining features, most notably the centrality of curriculum within a socio-ecological framing (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), where supportive practices are embedded sustainably across the entire student lifecycle. This leads to the key message of transition pedagogy: supporting students is a whole-of-institution responsibility (Kift, 2015). Transition pedagogy rejects fragmented, piecemeal interventions, advocating instead for institution-wide integration of practices. It recognises that student success is a shared responsibility across academics, professional staff, and educational leaders (Kift, 2015; Kift & Nelson, 2005). All areas of the university must collaborate to create environments that support students academically, socially, and emotionally, removing structural barriers (Gale & Parker, 2011). By embedding co-curricular and academic support into the curriculum, transition pedagogy ensures that essential support reaches all students, particularly those who face barriers to engagement with extracurricular services (Kift, 2015; Kift, 2023). The curriculum also serves as the platform for fostering belonging, scaffolding foundational skills, and mediating transition challenges.

Transition pedagogy operationalises its core tenets through six curriculum principles that guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of transition-focused curricula (Kift, 2009; Kift et al., 2010):

1. *Transition*: Proactive support for students' transitions into, through, and out of higher education. This includes addressing both the academic and emotional dimensions of change.
2. *Diversity*: Recognising and mediating the diverse strengths and challenges of student cohorts to create inclusive learning environments.
3. *Design*: Ensuring coherence and clarity in the sequencing of knowledge, skills, and values across the curriculum to scaffold student learning.
4. *Engagement*: Promoting belonging and active participation through peer and staff interaction, as well as real-world connections to disciplines.
5. *Assessment*: Using inclusive and formative assessments to build student confidence, provide actionable feedback, and prepare students for disciplinary expectations.
6. *Evaluation and Monitoring*: Embedding practices for tracking student progress, identifying at-risk students, and fostering students' capacity for self-reflection and regulation.

The Evolution and Impact of Transition Pedagogy

Transition pedagogy emerged as a response to the complexities of student diversity and the persistent challenges of student retention and success, especially in the context of massified higher education systems and the increased recognition of the importance of student equity (Kift et al., 2010). The framework has since evolved beyond first-year transitions to respond to broader challenges and incorporate post-pandemic priorities and lifelong learning (Kift, 2023). Kift (this volume 2025a, 2025b and 2025c) provides a triptych of reflective features, providing her assessment of where transition pedagogy came from (Kift, 2025a), its theoretical basis and consilience with other key constructs from the literature on the student experience (Kift, 2025b) and looks forward to "what's next" for transition pedagogy and its three signature features: its anchoring in inclusive curriculum design; its advancement of whole-of-institution approaches; and its focus on enabling academic and professional partnerships with students (Kift, 2025c).

Although transition pedagogy was first applied at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia (Kift, 2009), it has expanded to multiple use-cases nationally and internationally. Among other examples, McCluskey et al. (2019) describe their engagement with Kift's six curriculum principles during the development of Victoria University's innovative Block Model®. Although they note that many of the principles were in place prior to the Block Model's development, the study details how they operationalised transition pedagogy's emphasis on whole-of-institution commitment by aligning its teaching structure, assessment practices, and support services to create a cohesive and supportive learning environment. The University

of Technology Sydney (UTS) also successfully integrated transition pedagogy principles into its First-Year Experience Program, focusing on coordination between academic and professional units to deliver a seamless and personalised experience for students (McKenzie & Egea, 2017) and using distributed leadership models to enact change (Jones et al., 2012). In this special issue, these authors provide a further practice report, detailing their 15-year journey with transition pedagogy-led institutional change (Egea & McKenzie, 2025).

Internationally, transition principles have also informed resources including the Advance HE's guidance addressing the intersection of curriculum design and mental health in higher education. Led by initiatives such as their Education for Mental Health project, this work emphasised curriculum-embedded strategies to support students' mental wellbeing in response to growing concerns about psychological distress among students (Hughes et al., 2022).

In this issue, further studies make their own contributions to this body of knowledge. Linden et al. (2025) describe a project to increase commencing student success by embedding principles of transition pedagogy throughout the first-year curriculum at a large Australian regional university, demonstrating increased success rates for commencing students studying online and on campus. They again emphasise the importance of a coordinated approach to identifying disengaged students and providing targeted support at multiple time points (Linden et al., 2025). Enright et al. (2025) provide a practice report detailing a step-by-step guide to translating university strategies into actionable and cohesive faculty-level student success frameworks, underpinned by transition pedagogy, while Edmunds et al. (2025) describe a curriculum-based pre-arrival toolkit to support transition before student arrival on campus.

Edmunds et al. (2025)'s practice report also demonstrates a theme in the more recent transition pedagogy literature: the increasing mutability of transition principles and their application to specific aspects, cohorts or beyond the porous boundaries of university. Transition pedagogy has already been extended and developed into enabling, or pre-university preparative education, programs (Olds et al., 2022). Nieuwoudt and Jones (2025) develop this further in a practice report describing the curriculum principles of enabling transition pedagogy and their application to high school enabling programs. Similarly, James (2025) examines the transition of students in enabling courses and how they navigate their sense of belonging and identity change. Lim et al. (2025) and Kelly and Lock (2025) extend the framework in different ways; Lim et al. (2025) interrogate the application of transition pedagogy in navigating the use of generative AI in teaching and learning, while Kelly and Lock (2025) examine transition within the sphere of career readiness and employment education specifically. Finally, Naylor (2025) questions the core tenet of transition pedagogy requiring a whole-of-institution approach. Instead, he describes an organisational change study enacting transition pedagogy at the level of an academic school, rather than across a university, and the factors that led to successful implementation.

Although research into transition pedagogy has therefore broadened and developed beyond the initial core tenets proposed by Kift and colleagues (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift et al., 2010), the centring of curriculum as the site of holistic, student-centred approaches remains intact. Indeed, while whole-of-institutional change may be desirable, if not always pragmatic or within focus, the importance of holistic, joined up support remains at the core of the framework. Transition remains everybody's business, even if certain formulations of "everybody" may vary in scope.

Challenges and Opportunities

To conclude, we pose some provocations about the field of transition pedagogy research and practice.

1. *What are the critical points of failure in transition pedagogy?*

It is a widely observed fact that academic literature has a strong bias to successful confirmation, resulting in a deficit of studies into what *doesn't* work. We have observed here that transition pedagogy is a flexible, evidence-based pedagogy, based around six curriculum principles and three core tenets:

- Holistic (encompassing socio-ecological understandings of interventions across the student life cycle—the *who* is everyone, including students themselves, and the *when* is throughout and beyond the university experience)
- Curriculum-centred (as the key site of interaction for students—the *where*)
- Equity- and diversity-focused (the recognition that some cohorts are equity-deserving, and bring strengths and challenges worthy of recognition and inclusion within university communities—the *why*)

Kift (2009)'s six principles complete the pragmatics of the *how*. However, recognising transition pedagogy's flexibility, how flexible is it? What organisational interventions do not lead to successful implementation? Under what circumstances are these principles ineffective? As a coherent theoretical approach, is adherence to these tenets and principles enough to be "transition pedagogy" work, or is there more required? Are these principles *too* broad, and *too* inclusive to be meaningful and implementable as a pedagogy?

2. *Where transition pedagogy is applied, what are the barriers and facilitators?*

Operational complexity, resource constraints, and siloisation have all been identified as barriers to implementing transition pedagogy. Is there a scale above which the challenges outweigh the opportunities? Perhaps more importantly, what of the risks of tokenistic or surface-level implementations, where institutions adopt the rhetoric to align with regulatory frameworks but fail to translate its principles into sustained practice? This undermines the potential to drive meaningful, long-term change. On the other hand, (how) does technological integration facilitate transition pedagogy (as Kift [2025c] asks in this issue)? Are there risks in data-informed or data-reliant transitions to reducing students to metrics rather than partners?

3. *What are the key areas for extension in transition pedagogy research?*

Transition pedagogy's focus on diversity and inclusion has already been emphasised. With the growing emphasis on vocational pathways, upskilling, lifelong learning, and potentially micro-credentials, how well adapted are we to supporting transitions through non-linear educational journeys? This includes supporting transitions between sectors (e.g., vocational to higher education) and addressing the diverse needs of learners seeking flexible, short-term learning opportunities rather than Bachelors- or Masters level degrees (or even shorter award courses). Enabling transition pedagogies (Olds et al., 2022) may provide a model for these shorter periods of contact. What other critical areas should be brought within the umbrella (Kift, 2025c), such as mental health (Hughes et al., 2022), differing student conceptions of success (Coates et al., 2016; Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019), student participation in institutional governance and co-creation (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020), or even staff working conditions, professional development and professionalism (James et al., 2015)?

Conclusion

As transition pedagogy approaches its 20th anniversary, its influence on higher education remains profound. By reframing transitions as continuous, dynamic processes and centring the curriculum as a tool for engagement and success, transition pedagogy has reshaped how institutions ensure student success is not left to chance (Kift, 2015). While critiques highlight challenges in implementation, its adaptability and relevance to contemporary issues such as mental health, equity, and employability underscore its enduring significance. The next generation of transition pedagogy research must build on its foundational principles to address widening educational pathways, rising complexities, and the evolving needs of learners in an increasingly interconnected world.

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