

Transition Pedagogy in Action: A 15-Year Institutional Journey. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report examines how an implementation of Kift's (2009) Transition Pedagogy evolved over 15 years in a First and Further Year Experience (FFYE) program at an Australian university. Designed to enhance student success, particularly for students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds, the program applies transition pedagogy principles through a framework focused on student identity and belonging, curriculum, academic and professional staff, and supportive infrastructures. Forums and grants have promoted engagement with inclusive, student-centred practices, collaborative design, student agency, and personalised learning. Transition Pedagogy's curriculum principles have proven adaptable to changing institutional strategies and higher education contexts. The program's shift from teacher-driven to partnership-driven models, emphasising student voices and mattering, illustrates how transition pedagogy can evolve and provide a transformative framework for enhancing student engagement and success.

Keywords: Transition Pedagogy; institution-wide; First and Further Year Experience

Introduction

The aim of this practice report is to provide an example of the evolution of *Transition Pedagogy* over 15 years by reflecting on the case of one institutional program. The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) First and Further Year Experience (FFYE) program, based on the framework of Kift's (2009) Transition Pedagogy (TP), has been sustained since 2011, despite the challenges of the changing higher education environment, with increasingly large class sizes, heavy workloads, academic promotion pressures, reduced university budgets, and government demands. The FFYE program offers evidence of an effective operational working model and highlights new approaches to address the changing needs of higher education students.

The Program

The FFYE program began as a First Year Experience (FYE) program, designed to address the recommendations of the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) for increased access, participation and retention of students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. Led by the director of the learning and teaching unit and funded through the Widening Participation equity program, the FYE program aimed to support success and retention of students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds through intentional and informed student-centred inclusive curriculum practices. The philosophy underpinning the program is that *good practice that supports students from LSES cohorts, is good practice for all students* (McKenzie & Egea, 2016).

A FYE coordinator was employed and, in collaboration with the FYE program designer, led an advisory group comprising representatives from all faculties, student support and equity units to develop the FYE institutional strategy. The strategy

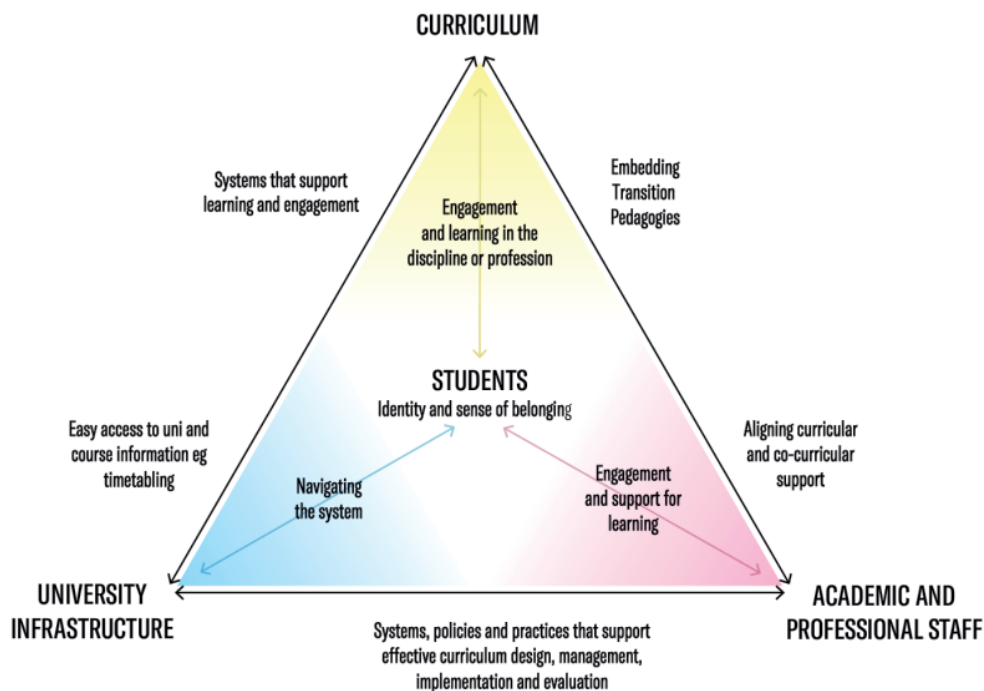


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placed being a student and developing a student identity and sense of belonging at the centre, fostered by: supporting student experience through TP in the curriculum, co-curricular support and support to navigate the university environment; supporting staff to support students' transition, aligning systems, policies and practices to support student success. These elements were represented diagrammatically in the institution's First Year Experience Framework (Figure 1).

Figure 1

First Year Experience Framework (see McKenzie & Egea, 2016)



The framework reflects the centrality of the curriculum working together with co-curricular practices “to transcend the silos of academic, administrative and support areas to enact a holistic, systematically managed, vision for the FYE.” It is this centrality that provides the “shared vision of FYE as ‘everybody’s business’” (Kift, 2009, p.13). It drew from third generation TP (Kift et al., 2010), and practices that support students from LSES backgrounds (Devlin, 2011).

Key implementation activities aligned with the recommendations from Kift’s ALTC (Australian Learning and Teaching Council) Senior Fellowship (2008-2009) for developing examples of good practice and building communities of practice between academic and professional staff. A small grant program, implemented in 2011, was designed to encourage subject coordinators to trial and evaluate evidence-based transition practices to address troublesome areas for students. Grants were to demonstrate the use of at least one of the First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) of TP: Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment, and Evaluation and Monitoring - using an inclusive student-centred approach. A learning community of academic and professional staff was fostered through forums where staff could connect, share and collaborate on practices within and outside the curriculum to support commencing students to be successful in their transition into undergraduate studies.

Commencing as a two-year exploratory project in 2011, the FYE program continued to be supported. In 2017, with changes in widening participation requirements, FYE became centrally funding, but remained focused on first year. In 2018 the program refocused towards the student transition-journey, inspired by Kift (2015) “capstones and the second year slump” (p. 68) to focus on “all types of transitions - into tertiary learning, into developing an identity as student and future self, and out of learning into the world of work.” (Nelson, 2014, p. 14). This extended FFYE program addressed the “whole of students” journey through their studies including transition in and through the course and out to employment or further study.

In the next section, we describe the program approaches that evolved to align with the changing top-down requirements of the university and higher education contexts, while fostering bottom-up staff engagement and support for student transition into, through and out of their studies.

Evolution of Forums and Transition Themes Over Time

FYE/FFYE forums create spaces for sharing ideas and practices aimed at fostering successful student transition. Forum activities are inclusive and relational, enabling participants to feel connected and culturally safe to share ideas and experiences, and develop ongoing collaborations. Engagement has broadened over time to include academics across all faculties, professional staff including student support, careers, administration, international, technology, data, and marketing, and students. Since 2011, between four and six forums a year have been run, with forum resources (videos, slides, activities, feedback) made available online. The following section outlines how the forums and use of TP evolved over time.

In 2011, forums engaged participants in exploring the six FYCPs of TP, sharing practices and insights and identifying opportunities for new practices. Collaborative activities were based on Kift's (2009) approach to first-year curriculum design - facilitating a relevant, engaging and social transition that is not overwhelming, whilst supporting students' psychological wellbeing and independent learning skills. They also enabled participants to experience belonging and inclusion practices that could be used with students in class or student support environments.

From 2012 onwards, forum themes focused on TP practices in the context of university strategic initiatives, such as the Graduate Attributes Project (2012-2014), learning.futures (2014-2016) and collaborative learning in new spaces (2014-2018). Forums typically showcased evidence-based transition practices that had been developed through FYE grants, with activities where participants explored the relevance of these practices to their own contexts. By the end of 2014, drawing from 75 FYE grants across 65 unique transition subjects, new forum topics included growth mindsets and building student capacity and confidence as learners. A newly published Successful Student Transition Guide (Sparke et al., 2014), designed by the FYE program team and casual academics provided more institutional examples of Kift's (2009) TP FYCPs in practice. New participants continued to join the community, spreading awareness of TP and transition practices more widely, while long-term forum participants and grantees developed more nuanced understandings of TP.

Student involvement in the forums commenced early. One experiential forum, designed to create the feeling of transition, gave participants the experience of working collaboratively on an early first year architecture assessment task (Kinniburgh, 2013). Students who were peer tutors in the real class facilitated the forum activity. A second forum enabled participants to experience how student leaders in the Peer Assisted Study Support (U:PASS) program facilitated learning through icebreakers, brainstorming, peer learning, collaboration, concept mapping. Staff were intrigued and asked many questions on methods and practice, and provided post forum feedback that include these comments:

Oh my God, I can't believe these are students..

I am already a big fan of U:PASS and am now even more impressed.

Following these successes, more students, active in equity, peer and support programs, or in FYE/FFYE grant projects were invited to join forums, as participants, on panels, facilitating activities and presenting key challenges that they faced. Their participation was eagerly sought, with feedback from the forums highly valuing student contribution.

Forums focused explicitly on Student Partnerships featured in 2017 and 2019. Students facilitated activities on innovative practices that they developed for studio programs in engineering. Examples from grant approaches, such as personalised learning where students designed their own learning goals and grading criteria, demonstrated new ways to design for improved student engagement and developed increased agency in their own learning.

Uses of learning technologies and analytics aligned with TP curriculum principles were also increasingly showcased. One forum demonstrated a new subject dashboard developed by academics, for academics to enable monitoring of student cohort diversity, retention and success, identify needs for adapting to changing cohorts, and systematically monitor changes. This project has developed over time to support academic requirements and grows in popularity (for current practice, see Britcher, 2025). Another forum showcased OnTask, an analytics-based tool for automating regular personalised feedback to students. Use of OnTask has also expanded, particularly amongst academics with very large classes.

From late 2018, with the expansion from FYE to FFYE, forum topics had an increased focus on whole-of-course belonging, inclusive practices for culturally diverse cohorts, collaborative working, career opportunities, partnerships (students and tutors), resilience and wellness.

During the pandemic (2020–2022), forums effectively transitioned online and emphasised compassionate and caring approaches, relationship-rich education (Felten & Lambert, 2020), authentic connection (Gravett & Winstone, 2022), building belonging (Percy, 2021), student agency, and enhancing capacity-building through teamwork and feedback literacy. During this time, the blog series on *First-year transition: Following the 6 first-year curriculum principles* (Egea & Melvold, 2022) provided an update on the Successful Student Transition Guide, focusing on remote teaching and learning. It highlighted the importance of belonging, compassion and agency in relation to TP.

The post-pandemic period (2023–2024) focused on academic engagement, belonging, wellbeing, and partnerships, aligned with the new institutional *Student Experience Framework*. A second influence was from the *Australian Universities Accord* (O’Kane et al., 2024), which afforded greater focus on TP, as the academic and social organising device to harness the broader curriculum. Sally Kift provided a forum keynote to raise awareness (see Girdler, 2024), concluding with a slide on “What Works? Inclusive, Intentional Curriculum” that is transformational and emphasises relationship-rich education, belonging, wellbeing, proactive personalised communications and support, inclusive assessment, equitable employability development and building student self-efficacy and competence.

The most recent forums continued this broader whole of university and whole person emphasis on transition, focusing on the connected ecosystem for supporting student transition success (2024 Forum 4), and on *Harnessing Students’ Passion* where students presented their funded Students as Partners (SAP) projects. The forum also introduced Gravatt’s (2023) work on mattering, inviting the community to advance Kift’s (2024, p. 23) notion of “mattering beyond belonging” with Gravatt’s work extending mattering beyond the individual perception to the intentional design of physical/learning spaces that enable mattering.

In summary, the years of forums since 2011 and the growing community of practice (now with over 1000 members, with 80–120 attending each forum) illustrate one approach to scaling up and broadening TP across an institution. The FYCPs have proven to be adaptable to alignment with different institutional strategic priorities and rapidly changing higher education contexts. Forums have provided the space for presenting research into what works for student transition, success and retention, and have enabled evidence-based practices developed in grants, to be shared. This has supported embedding of TP through multiple collaborative academic-professional-student partner projects, with some evolving into research studies addressing student transition (e.g., Campbell & Narayan, 2017).

The next section describes the grant scheme and contrasts the grant projects from 2013 and 2023 to show what the themes reveal about evolution in the application of the six FYCPs in the FYE, now FFYE, program.

Evolution in Transition Practices Developed Through Small Grant Projects

The grants program was initiated to engage academics in curriculum practices framed by both FYCPs and effective teaching practices that support LSES students in higher education (Devlin et al., 2012). Grants of up to AU\$4,000 supported one-year projects where academics and their teams could trial an intentionally designed inclusive and student-centred practice to address a troublesome area in their subject. To date, there have been 214 grants across all eight faculties, involving over 400 faculty academics (including casual academics), 18 central teaching staff, 27 professional staff members, and a range of student partners.

Initially, the grants supported undergraduate first year subjects, and transition subjects for second year entering cohorts. The idea was to encourage a wide range of academics to introduce or redesign curriculum practices based on the FYCPs. In most cases, academics were able to see benefit of such intentional design on student transition success.

In 2016, 40 academics with two or more grants were interviewed, revealing valuing of the need for student-centred practice, along with growth in their understanding of transition from the student perspective and a deeper understanding of TP, (Egea et al., 2021):

It [grant process] really enlighten me to the fact that although I’d been teaching in the first year space for many years, mostly what I ‘d been doing was focusing on the curriculum and the content, so for me that was a whole paradigm shift in how I thought about what these students are experiencing when they come in. (Business academic)

Similar outcomes were achieved as the grants expanded to more core subjects across the whole student journey, including postgraduate subjects, as reflected in the quote below:

In my own teaching, I have employed many of the strategies [X] and others, recommended, and learned how to embed transition pedagogies within my subjects and in the classroom. I have designed and taught over 13 different undergraduate and postgraduate subjects in the past 12 years at UTS, alongside coordinating three separate courses, ... in a student-centred manner ... Nowadays, I am applying the same transition pedagogies with graduate research subjects and research training with great success. (Social Sciences academic)

In recent years, the FFYE program coordinator held monthly meetings with grant leads to enable greater sharing of practice. This led to a rapid and in-depth understanding of the curriculum principles as well as student transition challenges. Evaluation of these sessions demonstrated their usefulness. For example, an academic from the Faculty of Health wrote:

dedicated time to share and discuss each grant holders' grant at our monthly grant meetings... sharing of ideas, and encouraged each grant holder to seek clarification, ask probing questions and offer insights from their previous experience to support and increased student engagement along with a focus on an improved student experience..., strong collaborative relationships were forged, laying a foundation for sustained enhancements in student experience and overall success.

Analysis of two grant rounds, separated by 10 years, was used to identify changes in grant focus and practices associated with the FYCPs. Twenty grant projects were funded in 2013 for 12 months and 10 were funded in mid-2023 for a shorter period of six months. The 2013 FYE grants exclusively focused on commencing undergraduate subjects, while the 2023 FFYE grants were open to core subjects across undergraduate and post graduate degrees. Analysis was based on application and report documents for each grant, using both human and human-adjusted co-pilot facilitated approaches focused on comparing 2013 and 2023 documents for overall themes and the use of TPs. Table 1 shows changes within the themes across these years.

In part, the change in the grant practices reflected the changing context of the higher education environment. The 2023 approaches reflected more student-centred, technologically integrated and data-driven approaches to applying FYCPs, in the context of increasingly large classes, reducing resources and advancing technologies. How the principles were interpreted also reflected an increasing focus on students as active agents. There was a shift towards more co-design and collaborative projects with students, including *just for me* feedback using personalised technology tools and mentoring programs. The application of TP broadened and demonstrated a greater understanding of the importance of viewing student learning success from the student's perspective, for example while 2013 FYE grants focused on teacher-facilitated development of transition skills, with some peer collaboration, in 2023 there was a greater focus was on the student voice to develop inclusive environments.

It was also noted that while the FYCPs provided an effective framework for grant projects, some were initially misunderstood. For example, the curriculum principle of Diversity was misinterpreted as addressing student deficiency (Egea et al., 2014). Transition was the most frequently cited principle, yet also the most conceptually challenging, as it represents both the overall transition process and a specific curriculum principle. In one 2023 grant, an SAP project referenced the Transition Principle as the guiding FYCP to support international design students through co-designed academic and social initiatives. Post-implementation reflection with the FFYE program coordinator revealed the project also addressed Diversity, Engagement, Design, and Monitoring and Evaluation. This shift illustrates how understanding of the principles can evolve through practice and dialogue.

Reflections on Successes, Challenges, and Opportunities

The value of TP from the perspective of student success, the student experience, a whole-of-university community, and professional learning for academic and professional staff is affirmed by the FYE and FFYE programs. The multiple forums, over 200 subject-based grants, the ever-growing FFYE Community, Teams channels, blog posts, transition guides, and data on cohort diversity and performance represent an evolving whole-of-institution practice for enhancing student transition success. Outcomes have been substantial as this quote illustrates:

The FFYE grants program has been critical in enabling academics, from casual and novice academics to seasoned academics, to purposefully design and implement activities and curriculum changes that engage with the FY curriculum principles. Those grants and projects over many years have led to improved student outcomes, improved retention and success for diverse student cohorts. We have seen changes that have become embedded practice and shared across the schools and faculties.

Table 1*Evolution of Themes in Transition Pedagogy Practices, Comparing 2013 and 2023 Grants*

Theme	2013	2023
Overall focuses on student transition	Easing transition for FY undergraduate students and supporting academic readiness and autonomous learning. Improving Engagement through interactive activities. Providing early feedback to help students understand assessment expectations.	More emphasis on personalised learning experiences. Broadened scope from academic to social and cultural integration, student wellbeing and sense of belonging and later year transitions.
Diversity and inclusion	Recognising the unique challenges faced by students from different backgrounds and providing targeted support, such as a “First in Family Facebook group” for LSES students.	Inclusive pedagogies, with a greater focus on intersectional diversity and co-designing solutions with students. Projects like “Transitioning Diverse Students into Transdisciplinary Learning” involve students in identifying key issues and designing interventions into the learning environment.
Student involvement: Design and engagement	Students were engaged in reflective and collaborative activities in the classroom, but the focus was more on providing support and resources to help students transition and engage.	Greater focus on social engagement. Over half the projects engaged students as partners in curriculum design. For instance, “Empowering Students as Partners in First Year Mechatronics Engineering” project invites high-performing students to contribute to the design and development of subject materials and potentially join the tutoring team.
Assessment and feedback	Improved feedback processes and practices, benchmarking and self-assessment.	Greater use of personalised feedback, just in time support, peer feedback, students as partners in learning support, ethical use of GenAI.
Evaluation and monitoring	Evaluation and monitoring were used to measure the success of projects and student progress, often through formative assessments and feedback mechanisms such as focus groups.	More systematic approaches to use of data and analytics, with projects like “From Project to Program” in Law automating a mentoring program. Using data analysis to monitor success and engagement. This reflects a move towards data-driven decision-making in education.
Use of technology	Technology was used for as online forms for feedback and online multi-choice questions for self-assessment or to diagnose readiness. However, the use of advanced technology was limited.	There is a significant increase in the use of technology, especially AI. Projects like “Learning as fast as AI” used AI for personalised feedback, and “How can AI be implemented into our pedagogy” explored AI's role in the design process.

The FYE/FFYE program has seen an intentional shift in supporting students’ transition. Previously, when students were struggling, they would be directed to counselling. With the deeper and expanding understanding of the student experience towards mattering and agency, capability, confidence, psychological wellbeing and safety, integrated curriculum and co-curricular practices have become the focus (with counselling as part of the system). The whole-of-institution approach to TP enacts Kift’s (2023) description of proven enablers:

... proactive transition management, especially over the first year; leadership committed to student learning; inclusive curriculum as the engagement integrator; nurturing of academic and social belonging; explicit development of student capability; easy access to support; staff capability development; systematic monitoring and analysis of student performance data; and working with students in partnership. (p. 132)

Listening to the diversity of student voices and acknowledging their experiences can support the university community to reflect on student needs and expectations in their transition. Students need time to develop their student and professional identities, and they may have a sense of loss as prior identities and ways of knowing change. By introducing the student voice to the FFYE program, we were able to learn from their lived experiences, fostering a greater awareness of student challenges, needs and expectations within the whole university experience, students' personal success goals and the need for building student agency. Forum feedback highlights the need for more inclusive practice, for example:

Hearing students' experiences of belonging and how we can take that into our classrooms

Demonstrating how the student voice matters in designing content that supports student learning

A similar reflection arose from a 2024 FFYE Grant project lead:

So I was listening to the student voice a lot more, ... I think that's changed how I'm implementing this [2024 grant practice] in this semester [2025], and also how I'm teaching in other subjects.

The importance of student voice and a compassionate, relationship-rich learning space is the added dimension that Kift (2024) brought to her recent work. Harnessing students' agency in their lived transitional experience takes mattering (Gravatt, 2023) beyond a personal perception that one's perspective matters or that one belongs, to consider the kinds of learning and support environments enable this to happen. Gravatt's (2023, p. 77) cites Bovill (2020) that such an intentional approach requires commitment and a new way to view teaching and learning:

Whole-class co-creation in learning and teaching requires the teacher to be responsive to the needs of each new group of students. Whole-class co-creation also requires a teacher to adopt a potentially career-long commitment to engage deeply with each new group of students encountered and to mutually negotiate each new learning encounter. This is a seismic change to the way that much learning and teaching is conducted within universities.

In the FFYE program, the student voice, facilitated through intentionally driven co-creation and partnerships with students in student learning environments, has been shown to foster a richer student experience and learning success. We suggest that by broadening and expanding TP to deepen awareness of mattering, student agency, confidence and capacity building and psychological safety throughout the student transition journey, successful transition becomes transformational, where all benefit. Working with students in co-design practice aligns with Kift's (2024, p. 23) updated view of TP:

... engagement of students, by students and with students as experts in their own learning, in a dynamic of student-institution reciprocity and shared responsibility

However, academics (and institutions) also have their own transitions, and take time to shift to engaging with the student voice and with student-centred practices that support transition journeys, the very essence of TP. For academics, transition as a journey can be seen as a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2005), although the curriculum principles provide guidance. One recent grant holder, with prior engagement in the program, has made sense of transition as a "phase" metaphor with her physical sciences discipline:

Someone described Transition Pedagogy in terms and phrases that make sense in my discipline (science) - a pedagogy built on a model of a student in one state who will undergo a transition to another state - and suddenly it all makes sense. The purpose of my practice is catalysing the phase transition. And I have a great framework for understanding phase transitions and their triggers, they lie behind so much of my research. Perhaps I should write a short blog for chemists and physicists on this! 'Transformative practices: Lessons from catalysis science for transition pedagogy.'

Future Directions

Transition pedagogy has played a critical role in building staff capacity to support students across their academic journey, yet many academics still lack a full understanding of what effective student transition entails. The FFYE program has addressed this gap by embedding student voices into forums, grants, and blogs, deepening the community's awareness of transition challenges. The program's shift towards more co-design student-staff partnership models foregrounds student agency, mattering, and relationality, marking a move from supporting to co-creating the student experience. As Gravatt (2023) notes, this requires both a mindset shift and changes in practice. If fully embraced, TP offers a transformative framework that meets the evolving needs of diverse learners in higher education.

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