A decade of Transition Pedagogy: A quantum leap in conceptualising the first year experience

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In is now 10 years since the term transition pedagogy (TP) entered the first year lexicon. Over the course of that decade, enormous gains have been made in how we theorise and impact our students' experiences of their determinative first year in higher education, much of it in the Australian context driven through a TP lens. This review article will examine the impact of TP on the first year experience (FYE), consider the extent of its adoption at both the disciplinary and institutional level, and seek to unpack the reasons for its validation and uptake. TP, and the six first year curriculum principles (FYCPs) that underpin its implementation, have drawn us in from the periphery of the curriculum where both students and the first generation of FYE initiatives were languishing. It focuses on what students have in common—their learning experiences mediated through curriculum— rather than problematising their diversity and difference. The distinctive features of this integrative framework are threefold: first, an intentional and foundational curriculum focus to mediate the coherence and quality of the student experience cumulatively over the student lifecycle; secondly, a whole-of-institution and whole-of-student emphasis that delivers a coordinated and integrated engagement and proactively intervenes to assure just-in-time, just-for-me support and a sense of belonging; and, thirdly, the enabling capacity of academic and professional staff working together in cross-institutional partnerships. As university learning leadership is challenged to respond to contemporary realities of finite resourcing, increased competition, dynamic change and diverse cohorts, it is suggested that TP, harnessed strategically and holistically across a whole institution, provides some longer-term answers for student learning, success and retention.

Keywords*: transition pedagogy; first year experience; curriculum design; whole-of-institution; whole-of-student; academic and professional partnerships.*

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> Higher education can transform the lives of individuals and through them their communities and the nation by engendering a love of learning for its own sake and a passion for intellectual discovery (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008, p. 5).

1. Introduction – Why first year matters

As the Bradley Report (Bradley et al., 2008) reminded the Australian university sector in 2008—the impact of higher education can be transformative. But, whatever an individual's prior experiences, making a successful transition to university is never a given. While many students adjust relatively easily, thrive and survive—many do not and consider leaving.

Recently, the number of students attending Australian universities has risen sharply in response to policy settings encouraging widening access and participation. Increasing numbers of traditionally under-represented students are now seeking to master their new tertiary student role (Collier & Morgan, 2008) with lower levels of academic preparedness, critical differences in social and cultural capital, and often ill-formed expectations of what to expect and what is expected of them. Many students who commenced university studies in 2015 are still the first in their family to do so.

Longitudinally, first year attrition rates from 2001 to 2012 have been relatively stable, though there are some recent signs of slight rises. Generalisations are not easy, as attrition has always varied greatly between states, between institutions, between different student cohorts and disciplines and even between a single institution's different campuses. Nevertheless, according to the latest data for domestic undergraduates (Department of Education, 2014), the 2012 attrition rate was around 19.5% (crude) and 13.47% (adjusted for students continuing at either the same or a different institution)—essentially double that of second year. Attrition for commencing international undergraduates has always been lower but, from a national low of 8.73% in 2009, even international attrition has started to creep up. The latest government data reports a rate of 9.50% in 2012 (Department of Education, 2014).

Particularly vulnerable are students from cohorts that have traditionally been under-represented in higher education. It is often students from the key equity groups identified by the Martin indicators of disadvantage (Martin, 1994) who fail to transition successfully when our institutional practices,

approaches and cultures are uncoordinated, piecemeal and not inclusive. It is on these key equity groups that the current Australian federal government seeks to re-focus higher education participation and success measures.

Successful transition to higher education is a significant issue. The cost of early student departure—for institutions, individuals, professions and societies across a spectrum of reputational, ethical, personal, economic and legal implications —is at its highest in the first year of university. A 2010 study of retention for the Australian sector conservatively estimated that, in financial terms alone, the total cost of first year attrition was more than $1 billion per annum or between $20-$36 million for each public university (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010).

When considering opportunity costs, of additional concern is that these official data have never taken into account a significant percentage of students who leave without ever being counted in the first place—those who don't take-up their offer, don't make it to Orientation Week or don't make it to the official week 4/5 census date. This "hidden attrition" is just as costly and wasteful.

2. The challenge of transitioning to university

Decades of research tell us that students consider leaving higher education for many complex and often inter-related reasons. Harvey, Drew, & Smith (2006) characterise these as a "complex combination of student characteristics, external pressures and institution-related factors" (p. 16). Most frequently mentioned as regards the latter are perceptions of course and teaching quality, lack of clarity around what is required for success, limited engagement, and expectations mismatch (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Recent national University Experience Survey (UES) data also rank "expectations not met" highly but report a significant minority of students nominating situational factors as reasons for considering early departure; factors such as health or stress, study/life balance, and both financial and workload difficulties (UES Consortium, 2014). Transition success may be further confounded as younger students attempt the simultaneous transition to independent learning *and* independent living.

It is clear that first year students face unique challenges as they make very individual transitions to university study; particularly academically and socially, but also culturally, administratively and environmentally. "First year students have special learning [and support] needs by virtue of the social and academic transitions they are making" (Kift, 2008, p. 4). The first year experience (FYE) of commencing students also varies greatly depending on

their entry pathway, preparedness, motivations, social networks and patterns of engagement. Put simply, the FYE "is not a homogeneous experience but a multiplicity of experiences contingent on type of institution and student characteristics" (Harvey et al., 2006, p. 135). Moreover, the lifecycle of a first year student fluctuates as the weeks and months unfold.

Consequently, the FYE bears a heavy burden if it is to cut through and mediate these complexities. It may be trite to say, but the first year must be foundational. It must lay down the learning platform for an end clearly in sight. It should foster a critical sense of belonging and student identity, through involvement and connectedness with the student's university and discipline experiences. It should facilitate the delivery of just-in-time, just-for-me tailored support, especially for time-poor students whose differing social and cultural capital on entry demands the equitable unpacking of the 'hidden' rules and expectations of and for learning success.

To reflect the extensive FYE research- and evidence-base, the first year at university should be engaging, inclusive, relevant and social for all students (Kift, 2004; Kift, 2008; Kift, 2009a; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). It must be all of these things so that the students who have been accepted into our university programs are supported to learn and, thus, are successful, retained and graduate, returning valuable private and public benefits to the nation (OECD, 2014). As Tinto (2002, p. 4) observes, "In the final analysis, student learning drives student retention".

In terms of success-proofing, first year is foundational also in the sense that it is where students establish (or not) their self-efficacy (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004) and positive patterns and habits of study. It is where they must acquire the academic skills and literacies needed to be successful and independent in their learning throughout their undergraduate years and for a lifetime of professional practice.

It is argued therefore that first year curriculum has a vital role to play as the intentional FYE centrepiece, "designed to assist student development and to support their engagement with learning environments through the intentional integration and sequencing of knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Kift, 2009a, p. 41).

This review article examines the framework of a 'transition pedagogy' (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2008; Kift, 2009a; Kift, et al., 2010) that has been researched and developed specifically to mediate a positive FYE. A transition pedagogy (TP) is "a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and supports the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts" (Kift, 2009a, p. 2). Since its inception, TP has been well received, adopted and adapted

both nationally and internationally across many disciplines, institutions and aspects of the student lifecycle. It is now well enmeshed in higher education lexicon, through its inclusion in the core business of many institutions' policies, practices and processes.

A central thesis of this discussion is that the characteristics of TP may be leveraged to address some of the key challenges and opportunities that present for contemporary learning and teaching leadership (Velliaris, et al., 2012). If TP is harnessed strategically and holistically across the whole of an institution, sustained by strong academic and professional (non-academic) staff partnerships as its central premise suggests is optimal, it can go some way towards managing and mitigating issues of current concern to university leadership. In particular, it is suggested that TP's deployment could assist in alleviating concerns around constant and dynamic change, finite resourcing, increasingly diverse student cohorts, and the necessity to build academic and professional staff capability accordingly.

3. The genesis of Transition Pedagogy

I will now turn to a discussion of the genesis of TP and its further maturation over the past decade as a comprehensive, integrated and co-ordinated approach to a coherent FYE. In the course of this discussion, I will particularly note the hallmarks of this whole-of-institution, whole-of-student FYE approach; what has been described as a "third generation approach" to the FYE (Kift, 2009a; Kift, et al., 2010; Wilson, 2009). How TP has resonated with and found a receptive audience in a "climate of readiness for change" (Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers, & Abraham, 2005, p. 53) will be discussed, while the challenges and opportunities that remain will also be examined.

TP is what Kuh (2008) might call a "high-impact practice", though it is a distinctly different FYE response from the first-year seminar that has been the pervasive hallmark of United States (US) practice for many years. Free of this empirical constraint in Australia and elsewhere, TP has been embraced as a holistic, theoretically-informed, but eminently practical, philosophy to guide best FYE practice and to deliver contextualised and individualised learning and support.

Though the FYE has been a subject of examination for over four decades in the US, in Australia, concerted, systematic and longitudinal attention only began in earnest when the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education (Melbourne CSHE) commenced its quinquennial FYE reporting in 1995 (McInnis & James, 1995). Concomitantly, the inaugural *International First*

Year In Higher Education Conference (n.d.) was convened in the same year. As James has observed, these examinations coincided with the move from an elite to a more massified higher education sector that delivered greater student diversity in a climate of diminishing resourcing; "retention and academic success [could] no longer be assumed as the student body [became] demographically more diverse and students' needs and expectations [became] less homogenous" (James, 2011, p. iii). Concurrently in New Zealand, Zepke, Leach and colleagues' research and helpful meta-analyses further advanced thinking and conceptualisation (for example, Zepke & Leach, 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2010; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2005; Zepke et al., 2005).

There have been many valuable meta studies of FYE theory and practice, most recently in the Australasian context by Nelson and colleagues with a focus on the trends in policies, programs and practices over the decade 2000-2010 (Nelson & Clarke, 2014; Nelson, Clarke, Kift, & Creagh, 2011). Other useful national and international reviews and syntheses have included: Benson, Heagney, Hewitt, Crosling, & Devos, 2013; the *Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP)* Project (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005); Ferrier & Heagney (2008); Gale & Parker (2011); Harvey, Drew, and Smith (2006); Pascarella and Terenzini (2005); Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2005, 2007); the *Student Transition and Retention (STAR)* project (Cook, Rushton, & Macintosh, 2006); the Scottish Quality Assurance Agency's *Enhancement Theme on First Year: Engagement and Empowerment* (Mayes, 2009; Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee [SHEEC], 2005-2008; Whittaker, 2008); Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot (2005); *What Works?* (Thomas, 2012); and Yorke and Longden (2004, 2007, 2008).

What these studies show is that, with relatively few exceptions, and certainly not until the last decade, most of the work on conceptualising the FYE had not considered the centrality of the curriculum to the commencing experience. Primarily, the focus had been on the individual characteristics and behaviours of first year students that worked against their successful integration into their university experience. Accordingly, recommended interventions generally targeted remediations from a deficit perspective, and from outside the curriculum; commonly designed to "make students fit" into the world of higher education and engage with university learning on its unadjusted terms (Brennan, 2014; Krause, 2003; Lawrence, 2005).

When research and practice are described by reference to "generational approaches" (Wilson, 2009), that is, in terms of increasingly mature approaches through the generational evolution of theory and practice over time (Kift, 2009a; Kift, et al., 2010; Nelson, et al., 2011; Wilson, 2009), most

of the interventions described in the first year literature until quite recently were disparate and siloed co-curricular, or "first generation", approaches (Kift, 2009a; Kift et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2011) that sat on the periphery of the curriculum and targeted student cohorts with, for example, orientation, transition and/or peer mentoring interventions and support. Commonly, there was little evidence of systematic, joined-up, whole-of-institution or whole-of-student approaches, nor of widespread "second generation" curriculum-centred interventions, other than in some isolated subjects or disciplines, and less frequently in whole programs or faculties (for example, as in science Baker, Barrington, Gleeson, Livett, & McFadyen, 2002 and in law Kift, 2003, 2004).

As first conceptualised in Kift & Nelson (2005, p. 232), TP sought to respond to these demands and emphasised the shared responsibility of all university stakeholders for the FYE. As observed by Kift (2008), the "next, great first year challenge" was coordinating, embedding and sustaining "coherent institution-wide approaches to enact the FYE as everybody's business" driven through the curriculum. This is a sentiment that has now found its way into institutional policy statements (see, for example, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) (n.d.); James Cook University (JCU) (2014)).

In 2006, with the award of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Senior Fellowship (Kift, 2009a), this whole-of-institution, whole student framework for first year curriculum design and transition support was investigated under the organising framework of TP. The Senior Fellowship adopted a curriculum focus to the FYE, as the conceptual missing link in then FYE theorising and practice. It sought to harness the first year curriculum quite intentionally as the academic and social FYE "organising device"—as the commonality and the "glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together" (McInnis, 2001, pp. 9, 11). In this way, the curriculum, which frames the "educational conditions in which we place students" (Tinto, 2009, p. 2) academically and socially, was positioned as having a dominant role to play in first year transition, success and retention, especially for time-poor, equity group students who are entitled to expect academic and social relevance, a sense of belonging and support delivered through their learning engagements.

4. Transition Pedagogy: An integrative whole-of-institution and whole-of-student approach

When looking for ideas as to how to progress this challenging work, there were some hints and exhortations coalescing in the early to mid 2000s that provided guidance. In 2003, delegates at the *First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) Conference* were cautioned that embedding institution-wide change to enhance the FYE in a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated way may take as long as ten years to effect (Swing, 2003). At a later *FYHE* conference, Kuh (2007) presented concerning evidence to the effect that the quality of the student experience may vary more *within* than *between* institutions. Tinto (2006-2007, pp. 1-2) then observed that despite "student retention [being] one of the most widely studied areas in higher education... [resulting in]… an ever more sophisticated understanding of the complex web of events that shape student learning and persistence", it was the case that "substantial gains in student retention have been hard to come by"; "there is much that we have not yet done to translate our research and theory into effective practice". In New Zealand, Zepke and colleagues had identified an emerging "adaptation approach", whereby institutions proactively sought to "adapt their administrative and academic cultures to meet the diverse interests of their students", moving beyond the more prevalent integration (only) approach that required students to "integrate … socially and academically into [the institution's] particular culture" (Zepke et al., 2005, p. 1).

Given concerted calls for institution-wide approaches to assure the coherency and sustainability of individual enhancements (John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, 2005; Krause et al., 2005; Swing, 2003), the substantial FYE quantum leap required was to "bridg[e] the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs" (McInnis, 2003, p. 13). The premise underpinning the Senior Fellowship was to cease problematising individual students, to reject a deficit discourse of student blame (Gale, 2009; Lawrence, 2005) and to focus instead on inclusion and achievement, with the curriculum as the centrepiece, rather than desultory, inequitable efforts on the curriculum's periphery.

The distinctive features of TP are therefore threefold:

1) an intentional curriculum focus to engage commencing students holistically in their learning, to mediate just-in-time, just-for-me support, and to inculcate a critical sense of academic and social belonging. This 'whole student' focus built on earlier work at the Senior Fellow's home university (Kift, 2002; Kift, 2003; Kift, 2004;

Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006; Kift, 2009a; Kift et al., 2010; Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012);

2) a whole-of-institution philosophy (Kift, 2009a), in the sense that TP, as a third generation FYE approach, requires "first generation co-curricular and second generation curricular approaches [to be] brought together in a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated strategy that delivers a seamless FYE across an entire institution and all of its disciplines, programs and services" (p. 1); and

3) the enabling capacity of academic and professional staff partnerships (Kift, 2009a): "Third generation strategies will require an institutional vision for the FYE that is shared by academic and professional staff who form sustainable partnerships across institutional boundaries to ensure its enactment"(p. 1).

TP is framed around the identification of six First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) that stand out as supportive of first year learning engagement, success and retention (Kift, 2009a). The FYCPs (Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment, and Evaluation and Monitoring) focus on supporting the commonality of curriculum in the student experience, rather than problematising dissimilarity: "the curriculum is what students have in common [and] is within our institutional control" (Kift, 2009a, p. 9). Curriculum, in this context, is conceptualised very broadly as "the totality of the undergraduate student experience of and engagement with their new program of tertiary study" (Kift, 2009a, p. 9).

One of the great strengths of TP is its integrative power, which is optimal when all of the FYCPs are operationalised strategically across the entirety of a student's institutional interactions and engagements. In those circumstances, as Hunt (2009) has observed, we get the "context right for staff, to get the context right for students". If we can make easy the administration of their learning, their access to timely support, and their capacity and motivation to belong and connect, and if we intelligently anticipate the inevitable peaks and troughs of the first year lifecycle, then we free students up to focus their energy on successful learning.

Such an integrated model, which overtly demonstrates institutional intent and commitment to the student experience, is effective, efficient and, critically, sustainable once it becomes enmeshed in curriculum design and delivery. As Nelson, Smith and Clark (2012, pp. 195-196) explain, in the context of a major cross-institution project:

The [Transitions In Project], therefore, enabled the institutionalisation of a sustainable transition pedagogy,

> the concept introduced (Kift & Nelson, 2005), articulated (Kift, 2009) and implemented (Kift et al., 2010) at [Queensland University of Technology]. In this implementation of transition pedagogy, *the six curriculum principles were used as the organising device to integrate all the institutional elements essential for first year student success...* It is this integrative power that now defines the transition pedagogy as a 'third generation' FYE approach, which includes first generation (co-curricular) and second generation (curriculum) approaches. [Emphasis added]

Moreover, as we focus on what we know about student success and retention and control for the vagaries at the student-institution interface, it has proven possible, not only to support at-risk students, but to have a positive effect on the student experience of *all* students:

> The changes to curriculum provision and learning, teaching and assessment, which have occurred alongside the transition from an elite to mass participation HE sector, benefit all students and can have a positive impact on higher level and critical thinking skills (Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman, & Reid, 2007, p. 48)

5. Validation of Transition Pedagogy

Since its articulation in 2005, the thinking and theorising underpinning TP have been validated by a large volume of further research and practice (see, examples in the Appendix). Over the course of the Senior Fellowship, significant feedback was received in Fellowship evaluations endorsing TP's efficacy, relevance and accessibility. Specifically, the framework was validated as an effective mechanism to move from FYE theory to holistic FYE practice —"Sometimes everything seems so complex & overwhelming but here are 6 design principles that put structure and meaning to the work I do" (Kift, 2009a, p. 18).

Most explicitly, Bovill, Bulley and Morss (2011), examining the literature on first-year curriculum design, commented favourably on TP and the FYCPs in the context of growing international attention directed at the centrality of curriculum to engage and empower first year students. More recently in the United Kingdom, the *What Works?* project (Thomas, 2012), in which 22 institutions participated in a three year program of evaluation and research activities investigating retention and success, concluded (2012, p. 15)

> …effective interventions are situated in the academic sphere…Effective interventions start pre-entry, and have an emphasis on engagement and an overt academic purpose. They develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, shape realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop students' confidence, demonstrate future relevance and nurture belonging.

When the increasingly rich national and international research-base around inclusion of under-represented cohorts is examined (for example, Alkema, 2014; Asmar, 2011; Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network, n.d.; Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & Mackay, 2012; Griffiths, 2010; Harley & Nomikoudis, 2014; Hockings, 2010), what consistently emerges as critical to student transition success is the intentional engagement and support of the whole student—academically, socially and pastorally—and the establishment of learning relationships and environments built on respect, trust, connectedness and inclusivity. Even in markedly different cultural contexts, recurring themes converge around: whole-of-institution and holistic approaches; a success focus; connectedness and relationships; culturally safe and inclusive learning environments; relevant content and pedagogy; culturally engaged and respectful teachers and support staff; peer-to-peer interactions, support and role models; building student capability; high, realistic and consistent expectations; and embedding and acting on regular monitoring and feedback.

These themes' resonance with TP and the FYCPs is to be remarked, whether the area of exploration is enabling programs (Kift, 2014a), short pathway courses (McIntyre, Todd, Huijser, & Tehan, 2012), effective pedagogy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Asmar, 2011; Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network, n.d.), the experience of Pasifika cohorts drawing particularly on the body of work commissioned by New Zealand's Ako Aotearoa (Alkema, 2014; Kift, 2014b), students with disabilities (Kift, 2012) or the teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Devlin, et al., 2012).

Significantly as regards TP's validation, and most recently in the Australian context, the advent of the national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in 2012, and the *Higher Education Standards Framework* against which higher education providers are held to account, have sharpened institutional focus on whole-of-program design and coherency and on the demonstrable need for student acquisition of program learning outcomes. The TEQSA *Standards Framework* also makes

clear the "Threshold Standards" required to assure delivery of appropriate student services, support and monitoring. It has become apparent that TP and the FYCPs provide a critical first plank in satisfying many of these regulatory aspects (Lawrence, et al., 2014), while the TP capstone principles referred to below (Kift et al., 2013) provide a final year assurance "bookend", closing the loop on their first year antecedents.

One of the six recommendations made in the Senior Fellowship's Final Report was that there should be "consideration given to… articulating sector-wide standards for the undergraduate first year" (Kift, 2009a, p. 3). This call was echoed soon after by the Melbourne CSHE in its fourth quinquennial review (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). It is pleasing therefore to report that TP and the FYCPs have been influential in the development of the inaugural Higher Education Standards Panel's 2014 advice to the Commonwealth Minister for Education when proposing the replacement *Higher Education Standards Framework*. Evidence of TP's influence may be seen especially in the proposed Orientation and Progression *Framework* aspects (Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP), 2014).

In closing on this part, Fellowship feedback was to the effect that the FYCPs presented a "versatile set of principles that has horizontal and vertical application across institutions" (Kift, 2009a, p. 11); that they were a "structured framework & methodology for practical implementation" (Kift, 2009a, p. 11). And it has proven to be so. As Guisard and colleagues (2012, p. 897) observed

> Kift's six curriculum design principles—transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring—have been widely adopted at many institutions, including [Charles Sturt University], and have been an incredibly useful 'foothold' for academics as they start to consider how to better support learners in developing capacities for navigating change during the myriad of transitions they will experience as professionals and individuals.

6. Academic and professional staff partnerships and further applications

As is evidenced in the Senior Fellowship's record of disseminations (Kift, 2009a), a significant array of professional staff groupings have engaged with the inclusive and integrative opportunities presented by TP's whole-of-

institution, whole-of-student philosophy. It is enormously gratifying to see, not only the growth in academic engagement with intentional curriculum design, but also that professional staff have been able to leverage the culture shift of cross-institutional collaborations to impact the curriculum.

Academic Language and Learning Advisors (Frohman, 2012; Harris, 2013; Lynch & Quantrill, 2013; Taib & Holden, 2013; Thies, 2012;) and University Librarians (Corbin & Karasmanis, 2010) have led the way to some extent, even partnering as between their professional groupings (Derrington, Hayes, Batchelor, & Peacock, 2011). Examples of other key professional staff who have worked closely with first year academics and the TP ethos include Equity Practitioners (Kift, 2009b), Disability Services (Kift, 2012), Student Services (Kift & Nelson, 2010) and Careers and Employment colleagues (Kift, 2013). It would be fair to say that the latter area in particular is evolving rapidly as we strive to elucidate for new students the employability relevance of their degree programs.

Other interesting examples of cross-institutional collaboration include a successful "model for embedded study skills support in one of the academic schools following a series of workshops based on Kift's (2009) transition pedagogy" (Benske et al., 2011, p. 54) and the development of "formal partnership agreements with the academic schools, Learner Support and the Students' Association" (Benske et al., 2011, p. 52). Lynch & Navin (2014, p. 1) report on the "formation of collaborative academic-professional teams" for a "systematic, strategic and scalable approach" to the FYE in an institutional context where "systematic institutional strategy was sustained and supported by top-down vision…[of] a governance infrastructure, policy environment and a university-level committee focused on the first year experience". Taib and Holden (2013) discuss a partnership approach to embedding research and learning skills development in first year (and see also Png & McKeown, 2011; Salisbury, Yager, & Kirkman, 2012). In a different type of partnership entirely, Lodge (2012, p. 16) reports on a "Principal Tutor program" in psychology, founded on the ethos of TP, which provides "a central contact and consistent administrative, academic and career information… to increase student engagement with the discipline". This quite perfect example of curricular and co-curricular alignment and coherence was shown to have had a "marked improvement" in retention (Lodge, 2012, p. 15).

More recently, TP has enabled consideration of how whole-of-institution approaches might best support students in their multiple transitions across the student lifecycle—into, through and out of higher education (Kift cited in Creagh, 2015, p. 2; Kift, 2015). For example, through intentionally

designed capstone experiences (Armstrong & McNamara, 2011; Kift, et al., 2013); to support pathways into university (Kift, 2014a; McIntyre, et al., 2012); and pathways between sectors (Pearce, 2008). Similarly, colleagues in Australia have now also begun researching in earnest the "Second Year (sophomore) slump" (Loughlin, Gregory, Harrison, & Lodge, 2013, p. 1; Taylor & Harrison, 2015).

7. Transition Pedagogy: Reflections, challenges and new frontiers.

TP hit a sweet spot in the sector at the time of its articulation and has since been influential and validated as described above. When the first ALTC Fellowships were awarded in 2006, there was a real hunger for learning leadership broadly in Australian higher education, and for specific interrogations into matters such as the FYE in particular. At the time, the Bradley Review, the widening participation push and the social inclusion agenda sharpened the focus on the criticality of this work, while, in later years, the TEQSA Threshold Standards around curriculum mapping and whole-of-course coherency, have also drawn attention to the need to scaffold the early acquisition of essential academic skills and literacies in tandem with disciplinary knowledge and capabilities. TP has provided an accessible roadmap and "the language (conceptual tools) for common conversations between academics (teachers & researchers) & academics and professional staff" to achieve these student outcomes (Kift, 2009a, p. 12).

From the institutional leadership perspective, the integrative possibilities of facilitating sustainable, cross-institutional partnerships for the betterment of student satisfaction, learning and success, are compelling. TP also holds agentic possibilities for the future of the higher education workforce. In 1999, Coaldrake and Steadman (1999, p. 14) referred to a "diffusion and blurring" of traditional university roles and noted the potential for a "convergence of academic and non-academic work" (1999, p. 15). The FYE is where this convergence can operate at its transparent best (or worst), for both students and staff. The proven efficacy of TP's partnership models holds great promise in this regard for the further and sustainable leveraging of new and improved ways of conducting institutional core business and capacity building.

None of this is to suggest, however, that institutional transformation by way of third generation FYE approaches is not a complex and multi-dimensional challenge. Responding to this reality, Nelson and colleagues (Nelson & Clark 2014; Nelson, Clarke, Stoodley, & Creagh, 2015) have

developed a "Student Engagement, Success and Retention Maturity Model" (SESR-MM) "specifically designed to assess the capacity of higher education institutions to initiate, plan, frame, manage and evaluate institutional student engagement and retention strategies and programs" (Nelson & Clark 2014, p. 32). Such a tool is a useful step along the path to whole-of-institution alignment, especially when the resultant diagnosis leads to strategic adoption of some of the possible models and exemplars catalogued in this review and elsewhere in the TP literature.

The contemporary drivers for addressing the "next great FYE challenge" (Kift, 2008) have crystallised crisply as the spectre of sector de-regulation looms large and the only certainties seem to be finite resourcing, increased competition and universal access. At stake are the costs of early student departure canvassed in the Introduction to this piece—reputational, personal, professional, ethical and financial. The new normal of universal access in our demand driven system will continue to challenge our FYE responses and strategies. Cohort diversity, not at all a bad thing, will continue to be pronounced in almost every imaginable respect, while the potential multiplicity of pathways, providers and bundled/unbundled delivery will have implications for the sector and its workforce. Our big ship institutions will need to be more adaptive, inclusive and innovative to survive the perfect storm of universal access in a de-regulated context, if they do not consider a need to be so at present. TP, harnessed strategically and holistically across the whole of an institution's core business, with its whole student focus, may provide some longer-term answers. No institution, now or in the future, can afford to deliver or duplicate *ad hoc* service provision or invest in initiatives that prove unsustainable once their champion moves on or funding runs out (Kift, 2008).

Are we there yet?

For even the best proponents and practitioners of TP, complacency is not an option. We have recently been reminded (yet again) that it is not the case that all students are assured of equitable and equal outcomes once they come through our institutional portals (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). This is exacerbated by the fact that many disadvantaged students often belong to multiple equity groups.

The experience for students who enter our virtual environments also continues to demand attention; unbundling and eLearning can indeed be equity responses when well scaffolded and supported, but the "it's cheaper online" push requires a more sophisticated and nuanced response than many of its advocates might allow. Again, there are promising signs that a TP ethos

may assist with these issues for first time online and distance students (Fasso, 2013; Brown, 2014).

Even so, there is much to be positive about. Institutional and cultural transformation has proven possible: a number of universities have honed their institutional intent and reaped the benefits. While it has been suggested that "progression from second to third generation FYE initiatives in the main, stalled at co-curricular and second generation program-focused level of good practice" (Nelson & Clarke, 2014, p. 32), it is interesting to observe, as Taib and Holden (2013, p. 1) have, that more recently an increasingly number of third generation, partnership approaches are now appearing, many of them highlighted above. I have little doubt such partnerships will become more commonplace, if for no other reason than because they must.

In the context of Victoria University Melbourne (VU), Brennan (2014, pp. x-xi) makes the point that a TP approach is a significant culture shift—"it may be easier to work within existing frames than to take on a longer-term, whole-of-institution approach". But, as she observes,

> In demonstrating multiple efforts to address 'transition pedagogies' (Kift et al., 2010) within a single institution, each [example] provides testimony to the effect of ongoing coordination – and that coordination is possible…; each [example] adds important dimensions to understanding what is a stake – for staff and students – in meeting the challenges of university massification (Brennan, 2014, pp. x-xi).

The imperatives of effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability will drive our sector to a maturity in its FYE approaches that widespread uptake of TP, focused around the integrative framework of the FYCPs, could support with considerable robustness. The work referred to in this review article and in the Appendix, in particular at early adopters such as QUT, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Charles Sturt University (CSU), VU, University of Wollongong (UOW) and JCU, has been salutary and transformative. As UTS records on its First Year Experience Project Website (University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), n.d.)

> Since late 2011, 107 small grants (of up to $4000) have been awarded to academics teaching first year students or students in transition pathway subjects, in some cases in partnership with professional staff. These projects address aspects of Transition Pedagogy (Kift 2009) in curriculum design and classroom practice. Each faculty has had some

highly successful outcomes through these grants, including improvements in students' confidence and sense of belonging, student success, retention, and curriculum design innovation.

Over the last decade, the academic leadership of this work, once invisible (Kift, 2008), has become increasingly assured as FYE governance structures, policy enhancements and university-level committees become commonplace. In 2011, a heartening review of FYE advancements evidenced that "research and practice around the FYE in Australasia has undergone its own evolution and progress towards maturation" (Nelson, et al., 2011, p. 44). The authors concluded that the "Transition, Design, Engagement and Assessment FYCPs were being addressed reasonably well, however the Diversity and the Evaluation principle in particular, required further attention" (Nelson & Clarke, 2014, p. 32). Some short months later, the rise and rise of learning analytics and the harnessing of adaptive learning technologies have witnessed a real lockstep change in the sector's capacity and capability to track and support individual students in their early learning (for example, Siemens, Dawson, & Lynch, 2013). This has given clear expression to the sixth FYCP, Evaluation and Monitoring. Similarly, the substantial and concerted national and international research efforts now delivering advice and recommendations around "what works" to enhance social inclusion and deliver inclusive pedagogy for underserved and/or under-represented cohorts, has ventilated the Diversity principle vigorously and with clarity.

A continuing challenge always will be to hold steady and maintain the focus necessary to assure these FYE efforts and enhancements are maintained and constantly reviewed for improvement over time; particularly given that it is unlikely this work will ever become redundant. This is being addressed in my own and other institutions by intentionally enmeshing the TP ethos within the institutional fabric of core business and, particularly, by ensuring that it is embedded in perennial curriculum design for sustainability and longevity. Opportunities for further areas of research, practice and theorising are plentiful and have been usefully collected together by Nelson and colleagues (2011) in that work's final chapter, "Learning from the Literature". One particular area worthy of further examination in our Australian/Australasian context is the "empowerment" of first year students, particularly through their involvement in first year curriculum design (Bovill et al., 2011). This last has been a specific focus of the Scottish Quality Assurance Agency's *Enhancement Theme on First Year: Engagement and Empowerment* (SHEEC, 2005-2008).

Looking ahead, it is interesting to observe that, while many of the issues regarding reward and recognition of staff engagement in the FYE are starting to settle, we see colleagues who take on responsibility for managing other key transition points, such as capstones and the second year slump, having to fight the same battles around workload recognition, succession planning and resourcing support. In every respect, the TP work at these other key transition points is as complex and time consuming as it is vital and integral to the learning, success and retention of our students.

8. Conclusion

> We all own the curriculum, and we all have a duty of care
> to enact it fairly, creatively and coherently. (Senior
> Fellowship Feedback in Kift, 2009a, p. 13)

The locus of a successful and sustaining FYE must be the curriculum and its framing of student learning and engagement. It is beyond question now also that, to deliver the necessary FYE quantum leap, we must move away from disparate, one-off initiatives and isolated examples of good practice. They are unsustainable and usually not scalable; staff are demoralised on their inevitable demise; and student success is left to chance by virtue of their *ad hoc*, incoherent deployment. It is equally clear, echoing Tinto, that we must eschew problematising the FYE and translate our theorising into practical and impactful implementation. Our students, many of whom make significant sacrifices to attend our universities, cannot afford for us to continue "tinkering at the margins of institutional academic life" (Tinto, 2009, p. 2) without greater intent and alacrity.

In all of their diversity, with their multiple identities and changing patterns of engagement, the curriculum is what all students have in common. It is within our institutional control and is the one assured engagement we have with them all. As discussed in the preceding pages, and in common with the optimal first year we strive to deliver, researchers and practitioners have laid a robust foundation of evidence-based, research-lead practices on which we may all now build.

A watershed in modern FYE thinking has been the articulation of TP, underwritten by its "rational and comprehensive approach to curricula design that is: Coherent… Integrated… Coordinated… Intentional… Cumulative… Interconnected… and Explicit" (Gale & Parker, 2011, pp. 27-28).

The FYE bears the burden of being many things to many stakeholders but, at its core, its remit is student learning and success. In the spirit of social inclusion and widening participation, the FYE also speaks to social justice, equality and equity.

In these times of policy uncertainty, it is salutary to remember that higher education is one of most efficient mechanisms we have for social mobility. As Brown and Moffett (cited in O'Shea & Stone 2014, p. 18) urge "the challenge of contemporary education is to regain a sense of shared purpose and to recognize, all over again, the power of the learning process in transforming lives."

The research on the FYE is clear and compelling. Students have spent far too long languishing on the curriculum's periphery in search of unmediated transition assistance. The professional staff interventions of previous decades are necessary but not sufficient. Academics must step up and leverage the curriculum and its delivery to influence the experience of all students and to make equitably explicit the implicit rules and expectations of disciplinary engagement and success.

Tinto (2008) has argued that "access without support is not opportunity". Gale (2009, p. 9) adds that "opportunity confined to support is not equity"; we must "engage in changing higher education… from the centre… [specifically] the student learning environment and experience" (p. 10).

Quite fundamentally, we need to adapt, both culturally and structurally, the prevailing character of the first year student experience to ensure that student success is not left to chance, at least not in those aspects over which we have agency (Kift, 2009a).

A decade of TP's deployment has shone a light on the possible; if we stay focused and true—and the incentives are there for us to do so—the future looks bright for all commencing students and their learning, success and retention.

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Appendix: Intentional first year curriculum design and institutional uptake of Transition Pedagogy

In the lead-up to the ALTC Senior Fellowship, it was identified that there was a dearth of shared wisdom and very few accessible case study exemplars of good first year curriculum design upon which innovators might draw. How customisable first year curriculum might be enabled by academic and professional partnerships was also barely explored. Fellowship outcomes and deliverables therefore included several discipline specific case studies of intentional first year curriculum design (as regards: education, arts and social sciences, information technology, applied sciences, law, creative arts, and science), together with a suite of "expert commentaries" on those case studies presented from a range of, primarily professional staff, perspectives. Three practical and user-friendly checklists for (each of) institutional leaders, program co-ordinators and first year teachers were also produced.

All of these materials, together with the outcomes of a *FYE Curriculum Design Symposium* held in 2009, are complied on the Transition Pedagogy website (Kift, n.d.). A detailed *Transition Pedagogy Handbook*, outlining good practice at the whole-of-institution level, is also available (Nelson, Creagh, Kift & Clarke, 2014).

Supplementing the Fellowship's 2009 curriculum case studies, TP has been utilised across an ever-expanding array of disciplines, for example:

- Teacher education (Gilmore, 2014);
- Health sciences (Guinea, Burston, Corfee, Lea-Gale, & McDonald, n.d.);
- Law (James & Field, 2013; Kift, 2003; Kift, 2004; Larcombe & Malkin, 2011; Stickley, 2011);
- Social work (Goldingay, et al., 2012);
- Medicine (Raw, 2013; Raw, Tonkin, Peterson, & Jones, 2015);
- STEM (Crehan & Dooley, 2014);
- Media and Communication (Araujo et al., 2014);
- Agricultural Business Management (Guisard et al., 2012);
- Veterinary Science (De Cat, Cavalieri, & Webster, 2014);
- Science (Arndell, Bridgeman, Goldsworthy, Taylor, & Tzioumis, 2012);

- Architecture (Kinniburgh, 2013);

- Psychology (Lodge, 2012); and

- Business (Morton, 2011).

Transition Pedagogy, together with the FYCPs that underpin it, have also been "widely adopted at many institutions" (Guisard et al., 2012, p. 879). It has obviously been influential in its home institution, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) (Kift, 2009a; Kift, et al., 2010; Nelson, Kift & Clarke, 2012; Nelson, et al., 2012; Nelson, et al., 2014), but also, for example, at:

- Curtin University in its *Teaching and Learning Handbook* (Curtin University, 2014);

- James Cook University (JCU) in its *Transition Initiative Framework* (James Cook University (JCU), 2012) to support a university-wide retention strategy, most recently focused on embedding Strategic Integrated Learning Advisors (SILA) (Lynch & Quantrill, 2013) and on deploying program-focused "Retention Action Teams" comprised of a broad range of academic and professional collaborators (Lynch & Navin, 2014);

- Charles Sturt University (CSU) in the explicit adoption of the FYCPs "to support an enhanced CSU student experience" (Smith, 2010, p. 1; Guisard et al., 2012). In a particularly interesting development, McEwen & Trede (2014, p. 63) have set about conceptualising workplace learning at CSU "as a powerful transition pedagogy especially for under-represented first year student groups because of its focus on practical, embodied and relational aspects.";

- University of Technology Sydney (UTS) through a concerted, whole-of-institution capacity building strategy (Egea, Griffith, & McKenzie, 2014; McKenzie & Egea, 2015), including an annual grants scheme to "embed transition pedagogies in curriculum" (University of Technology Sydney (UTS), n.d.; 2014);

- RMIT University in its articulation of principles for inclusive teaching and assessment (Harley & Nomikoudis, 2014); in the RMIT School of Media and Communication's two phase *The Belonging Project* (Araujo et al., 2014) and in that School's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2013-2015: "There will be an ongoing focus on 'transition pedagogy' and our students will develop a sense of belonging, empowerment and reward for success" (RMIT University School of Media and Communication, 2013, p. 4);

- University of Western Sydney (UWS) in seeking to adopt a "holistic, coherent and integrated institution wide approach to first year student transition" (Gill, Lombardo, & Short, 2013, p. 1);

- Victoria University (VU) through the explicit adoption of a "transitions pedagogy" approach in its *VU Agenda and Curriculum Blueprint* (Victoria University, 2012), which, as Funston, Gil and Gilmore (2014) record, has led to significant curriculum transformation at that university (for example, Brennan, 2014; Gil, 2014; Zammit, 2014);

- Australian National University (ANU) in its Student Experience and Transition (SET) project, which is described as a "holistic first year transition experience for all new students" (Bull, Preston, & Mariwala, 2013, p. 1);

- Edith Cowan University (ECU), which had a FYE focus under the ECU *Learning Edge Project* (known as *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond*), a project funded under the Australian Federal Government's Structural Adjusting Funding (SAF). Resources developed for this aspect of Curriculum 2012 drew heavily on TP and the FYCPs; for example, a *FYE Factsheet* and a *FYE How to do it guide* (Edith Cowan University (ECU), n.d.);

- Charles Darwin University (CDU) in its *Student Retention Project*, which has the aim of "support[ing] students' transition into higher education in their first year, and to support teaching staff to design 'intentional and holistic first year curriculum' (Kift, 2009)" (Charles Darwin University (CDU), n.d.). The project is being delivered via a program of teaching and learning FYE grants, a student email campaign, a First Year Toolkit and an Innovative Teaching Seminar Series;

- Flinders University, which is seeking to adopt a "whole-of-university – or what has been termed the 'third generational' approach to transition and retention" (Kutieleh & Egege, 2013, p. 1), enabled by the appointment of a Director of Transition, the establishment of the Transition Office, and the appointment of School-based Directors of First Year. At Flinders, first year curriculum design is supported by a Factsheet expanding on the FYCPs and TP (Centre for University Teaching, 2013) and a small grants scheme based on the successful UTS model referred to above;

- University of New England (UNE) where a "First Year Teaching and Learning Network (FYTLN) [has been created] in an attempt to

embed a flexible, discipline-appropriate and institution-wide engagement with transition pedagogy" (Clark, et al., 2015, p. 108). A LibGuide on *Teaching First Year Units* (University of New England (UNE), n.d.) referencing TP and the FYCPs has also been developed;

► University of Wollongong (UoW) where TP has been adapted and extended to inform the institution-wide implementation of UoW's Curriculum Transformation Project (CTP). CTP is described as a "whole-of-course framework for transition pedagogy" (O'Donnell, Wallace, Melano, Lawson, & Leinonen, 2015, p. 2) and aims to deliver "intentionally designed curriculum that enables a smooth, supported shift into higher education and a successful transition from university to the world of work and lifelong learning" (p. 3);

► Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland, under the auspices of its Moving Forward Initiative (Benske, Brown, & Whittaker, 2011, p. 1): "a university-wide strategic approach to enhancing the first-year student experience and to improving transition, progression and retention";

► Edge Hill University, Lancashire, in the development of an Undergraduate Framework, which has "promoted a holistic pedagogical approach through the articulation of nine lenses that underpin curriculum design across levels" (Forsyth, 2011, p. 39).