

PRACTICE REPORT

Reimagining transition through disciplinary learning: A design-led framework for first-year curriculum design

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Received 10 November 2025 Accepted 18 September 2026 Published online 23 September 2026

Pages 25-31

Abstract

Generic transition approaches may not fully reflect the distinctive practices, characteristics, and ways of learning associated with different disciplines, creating a potential disconnect between transition support and disciplinary contexts. This challenge is particularly evident in design education, where students are expected to engage with critique, experimentation, ambiguity, iterative making, and feedback-rich learning environments while developing learner, creative, and professional identities. This practice report presents the redesign of a first-year design subject, Introduction to Design Studies, in which transition support was embedded within foundational disciplinary learning rather than delivered through standalone transition interventions. The redesign resulted in a framework organised around four interconnected pillars: Design foundations, Onboarding and support, Academic skills, and Personal and professional capabilities. Informed by transition pedagogy and related theories of learning, reflection, and learner development, the framework aligned transition support with the distinctive characteristics of design education, integrating disciplinary learning, academic capability development, identity formation, and student support within a coherent curriculum structure. The framework was operationalised through scaffolded learning activities, embedded academic literacies, reflective learning experiences, developmental assessment, and inclusive curriculum design strategies. Its primary contribution lies in demonstrating how transition pedagogy can be translated into a discipline-specific curriculum framework that aligns transition support with disciplinary practices, learner development, and identity formation while providing a foundation for adaptation across other disciplinary contexts.

Keywords Transition pedagogy; first-year experience; higher education; curriculum design; design education

How to cite Simon, E. (2026). Reimagining transition through disciplinary learning: A design-led framework for first-year curriculum design. *Journal of Pathways Education and Research*, 1(1), 25-31.

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Introduction

The first year of university is a critical period for student engagement, retention, and success (Kift et al., 2010). Transition pedagogy advocates whole-of-curriculum approaches that embed academic, social, and personal support within disciplinary learning experiences (Kift et al., 2010). However, many transition initiatives remain generic,

prompting growing interest in how transition support can be aligned with disciplinary ways of learning, knowing, and becoming (Jones et al., 2023).

Design education presents a distinctive transition context. Students must simultaneously engage in critique, experimentation, iterative making, and the public presentation of ideas while developing creative and professional identities (Faerm, 2023; Thomas, 2019).

Although central to creative development, these forms of learning require students to navigate ambiguity and ongoing feedback, experiences associated with uncertainty, self-doubt, perfectionism, and impostorism that may influence self-efficacy and belonging during the transition to higher education (Bandura, 1977; Goodwin, 2023; Yang et al., 2024). Broader evidence from the creative industries similarly highlights the importance of wellbeing within creative contexts (Elmes & Riseley, 2024).

These characteristics suggest that transition in design education extends beyond academic adjustment to include the development of confidence, belonging, creative capability, and emerging disciplinary identities. This raises questions about how transition support can be meaningfully embedded within disciplinary practice while responding to the distinctive characteristics of disciplines, learners, and learning contexts. The curriculum redesign was therefore guided by the following question:

How can transition pedagogy be integrated within authentic disciplinary learning while responding to the distinctive characteristics of disciplines, learners, and learning contexts?

This practice report presents an adaptable framework developed through the redesign of a first-year design subject and reflects on its initial implementation. The framework offers a discipline-specific approach to integrating transition support, learner development, and disciplinary learning within a coherent curriculum design. Although developed within a design education context, the framework is intentionally adaptable and may provide a foundation for adaptation across other disciplinary contexts.

Context

This curriculum was developed within the School of Design at a multi-campus Australian university. The school comprises approximately 3,000 students studying across a range of creative and technology disciplines. Curriculum review activities identified challenges relating to student engagement, progression, and transition within first-year subjects, prompting consideration of how transition support might be more effectively integrated.

Two contextual characteristics were particularly relevant. First, the university operates across four Australian campuses and delivers programs to both on-campus and online students, with more than 65% of the cohort studying remotely through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous delivery. This distributed learning environment was significant given the importance of belonging and social connectedness during transition and evidence that online students may experience lower levels of social integration and connection with peers, staff, and their institution (Kift et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2024; Adlington et al., 2024).

A further consideration was the presence of students who identified as neurodivergent within the cohort, reinforcing the importance of flexible and inclusive curriculum design that accommodates varied learning preferences and modes of participation (Durgunoz & Durgunoz, 2026).

Collectively, these characteristics highlighted the need for a curriculum approach that supported belonging, learner development, and inclusive participation while remaining grounded in disciplinary practice. These considerations informed the curriculum design principles and implementation decisions described in the following section.

Curriculum design approach

Curriculum redesign commenced with a review of a previously offered standalone transition subject focused on onboarding and generic academic skills. Curriculum review activities, teaching team discussions, student feedback, and onboarding journey-mapping indicated that students often

perceived transition content as disconnected from their disciplinary studies. The redesign was therefore guided by the premise that transition support should be embedded within disciplinary learning, with particular attention to supporting self-efficacy, reflection, and learner identity development through participation in design practice.

For design students, learning frequently occurs through making, critique, reflection, experimentation, and identity formation (Faerm, 2023; Thomas, 2019). Design practice requires engagement with ambiguity, iteration, and feedback, while reflection supports learners to examine decisions, interpret experiences, and develop professional judgement (Schön, 1983). These characteristics reinforced the curriculum's emphasis on reflection, experimentation, and learner development as mechanisms for supporting transition.

To inform this approach, the curriculum redesign drew on transition pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010), enabling principles (Nelson, 2014), constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), the Student Lifecycle Model (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010), reflective practice (Schön, 1983), and contemporary design education literature. Together, these perspectives informed a set of curriculum design principles that translated transition concepts into practical curriculum decisions. Transition pedagogy and enabling principles informed curriculum-integrated onboarding and support strategies; constructivist, experiential, and design-learning perspectives informed active and applied learning experiences; and self-efficacy, reflective practice, and student lifecycle concepts informed the emphasis on reflection, learner identity, confidence, and developmental assessment.

To normalise adjustment challenges as an anticipated aspect of commencing university, an adapted U-Curve of Adjustment model (Risque et al., 2007), based on Oberg's (1960) concept of culture shock, was integrated into the curriculum. The model framed transition as a developmental process characterised by periods of enthusiasm, challenge, and adaptation, informing onboarding, reflection, and self-evaluation activities throughout the subject. In doing so, it supported the curriculum's emphasis on connectedness, capability, purpose, and resourcefulness during transition (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010).

To accommodate the diverse needs of a geographically distributed cohort, the curriculum incorporated learner choice, multimodal resources, flexible participation options, and adaptable pacing. These decisions drew on Universal Design for Learning principles and were particularly relevant within a cohort that included students who identified as neurodivergent (CAST, 2018; Durgunoz & Durgunoz, 2026).

The curriculum design principles (Table 1) translated the contextual challenges and theoretical perspectives underpinning the redesign into actionable curriculum strategies. The principles subsequently informed decisions relating to curriculum structure, learning activities, assessment design, sequencing, and student support and formed the conceptual foundation of the framework presented in Figure 1.

Framework

The framework (Figure 1) synthesises the curriculum design principles presented in Table 1 into four interconnected pillars: *Design foundations*, *Onboarding and support*, *Academic skills*, and *Personal and professional capabilities*. Emerging from the curriculum design principles, the framework provides the organising structure through which transition support, learner development, and disciplinary

Table 1
Curriculum Design Principles

Principle	Design intent	Curriculum implementation
Active, applied, and constructivist learning	Support active participation, experimentation, reflection, and application within authentic disciplinary contexts while encouraging curiosity, exploration, and learning through making.	Experiential design activities, iterative learning cycles, reflective journals, and applied learning experiences were incorporated throughout the subject to support learning through making, experimentation, exploration, reflection, and application.
Normalising transition and adjustment challenges	Transition is framed as a developmental process, normalising experiences of challenge and adaptation through discussion and reflection.	An adapted U-Curve of Adjustment model was introduced in Week 1 and revisited through reflection, self-evaluation, discussion, and self-efficacy activities across the trimester. The model was intended to provide a shared framework for understanding and reflecting on transition experiences.
Start-strong strategies	Provide students with early opportunities to understand university expectations, develop effective learning practices, and access resources that support their transition into higher education.	Structured onboarding resources and developmental activities were embedded to introduce university expectations, learning strategies, goal setting, and support services. Transition-related content was integrated throughout the curriculum rather than confined to orientation activities.
Normalising help-seeking and wellbeing	Position help-seeking, wellbeing, and connection as integral aspects of successful engagement with higher education.	Support-network activities, alumni insights, and wellbeing resources were embedded throughout the subject to encourage awareness of and engagement with academic and wellbeing support services.
Embedded academic literacies	Academic literacies are contextualised within disciplinary learning and introduced progressively throughout the curriculum.	Tailored academic writing, referencing, research, design communication, and AI literacy resources were embedded within learning activities and assessment tasks and introduced at points where students were required to apply them through design practice.
Learner identity, personal and professional capabilities	Support the development of learner and creative identities alongside self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-regulation, adaptability, communication, professional capabilities, and transferable skills.	Reflective journals, self-assessment activities, peer feedback, and assessment tasks were designed to support learner and creative identity development.
Critical and creative thinking	Support inquiry, creativity, critique, problem-solving, and engagement with ambiguity through disciplinary learning experiences.	Creative challenges, critique processes, reflective learning activities, peer review, and opportunities for iterative refinement were incorporated throughout the subject to support inquiry and creative problem-solving.
Inclusive and flexible strategies	Provide accessible, flexible, and inclusive learning experiences through multiple pathways for engagement, participation, and demonstration of learning.	Flexible submission arrangements, multimodal learning resources, adaptable pacing, and options for synchronous and asynchronous participation were incorporated to support flexible participation and access.
Low-stakes and developmental assessment	Provide opportunities for practice, reflection, and iterative learning through developmental assessment experiences that emphasise learning processes over performance comparison.	Competency-based grading, formative feedback, reflection activities, and a dedicated reflection week were designed to support iterative learning and capability development.
Balancing student agency with proactive support	Support learner agency through choice, autonomy, and self-directed learning while providing structured guidance, scaffolding, feedback, and timely support.	Learner choice was embedded within modules, learning activities, and assessment tasks and was supported through guidance, exemplars, and formative feedback.

learning are integrated and enacted through curriculum, assessment, sequencing, and student support.

Design foundations pillar provides the disciplinary context through which transition-related capabilities are developed, introducing foundational design concepts, practices, and professional contexts.

Onboarding and support pillar supports academic, social, and institutional adjustment through curriculum-integrated onboarding, wellbeing, help-seeking, and support activities.

Academic skills pillar embeds academic literacies, learning strategies, assessment capabilities, and reflective learning within disciplinary practice.

Personal and professional capabilities pillar supports learner and professional identity development, self-awareness, self-efficacy, adaptability, reflection, communication, and future-focused capabilities.

The framework is organised around four overarching dimensions of transition: confidence, belonging, coping behaviours for academic and social adjustment, and the capacity to navigate higher education within a disciplinary context.

Although developed within a design context, the framework is intentionally adaptable and may provide a foundation for adaptation across other disciplinary contexts.

Learning design architecture

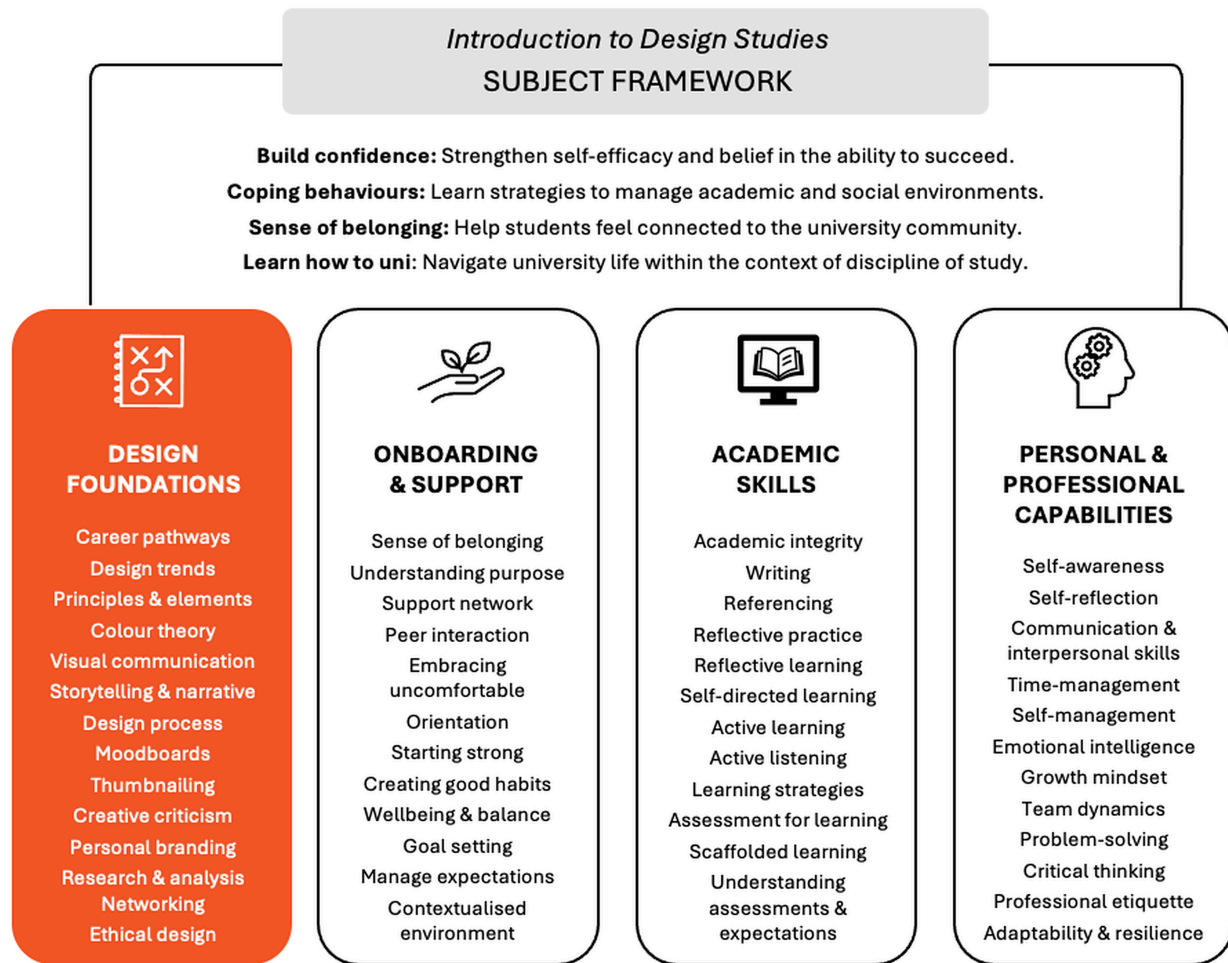
The curriculum design principles informed a series of implementation decisions relating to curriculum structure, assessment, reflective activities, support strategies, and learner engagement. Collectively, these decisions translated the framework into a coherent learning design that integrated transition support, learner development, and disciplinary learning.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the learning design comprised four interconnected components: a scaffolded curriculum structure, weekly learning activities and discussion forums, a self-reflection journal, and assessment tasks, all supported by a competency-based grading approach. Figure 3 illustrates how these components were sequenced across the subject.

Twelve-module curriculum structure

Consistent with the principles of inclusive and flexible learning, balancing learner agency with support, and curriculum-integrated onboarding, the curriculum was organised into twelve scaffolded modules that integrated

Figure 1
Introduction to Design Studies Subject Framework



disciplinary learning, onboarding and support, academic capability development, and personal and professional capability development. The sequence progressively shifted emphasis from transition support and learner development towards increasing disciplinary engagement and independence. Recognising the characteristics of a large online cohort and the presence of students who identified as neurodivergent, learner choice, multimodal resources, flexible participation options, adaptable pacing, and support resources were embedded throughout the curriculum.

Weekly learning activities and discussion forums

Consistent with the principles of active, applied, and constructivist learning, weekly learning activities and discussion forums engaged students in experimentation, peer interaction, and disciplinary practice. As developmental stepping stones towards assessment, they provided opportunities for formative feedback, reflection, peer learning, and connection within the learning community.

Weekly self-reflection journal

Consistent with reflective practice and experiential learning perspectives, self-reflection formed a central component of the learning design through a weekly journal focused on learning experiences, challenges, progress, support networks, and personal development. The journal was designed to encourage self-awareness, reflection on learning, and consideration of emerging learner and designer identities. Reflections accumulated across the trimester and informed the final assessment, providing a basis for self-evaluation, goal setting, and future planning.

Assessment design

Assessment design enacted several curriculum principles, particularly low-stakes developmental assessment, learner identity development, embedded academic literacies, and balancing learner agency with proactive support. Assessments were sequenced from self-awareness and transition planning to creative practice and disciplinary application, culminating in reflection and future planning. Assessment was therefore designed to support confidence, capability, and identity development through engagement in design practice.

A competency-based grading approach replaced traditional higher education grading. Students received either a satisfactory or non-satisfactory outcome, with successful completion resulting in a Non-Graded Pass (NGP). Consistent with Kohn's (2013) critique of grades and performance ranking, the approach prioritised engagement with learning and development over comparative performance.

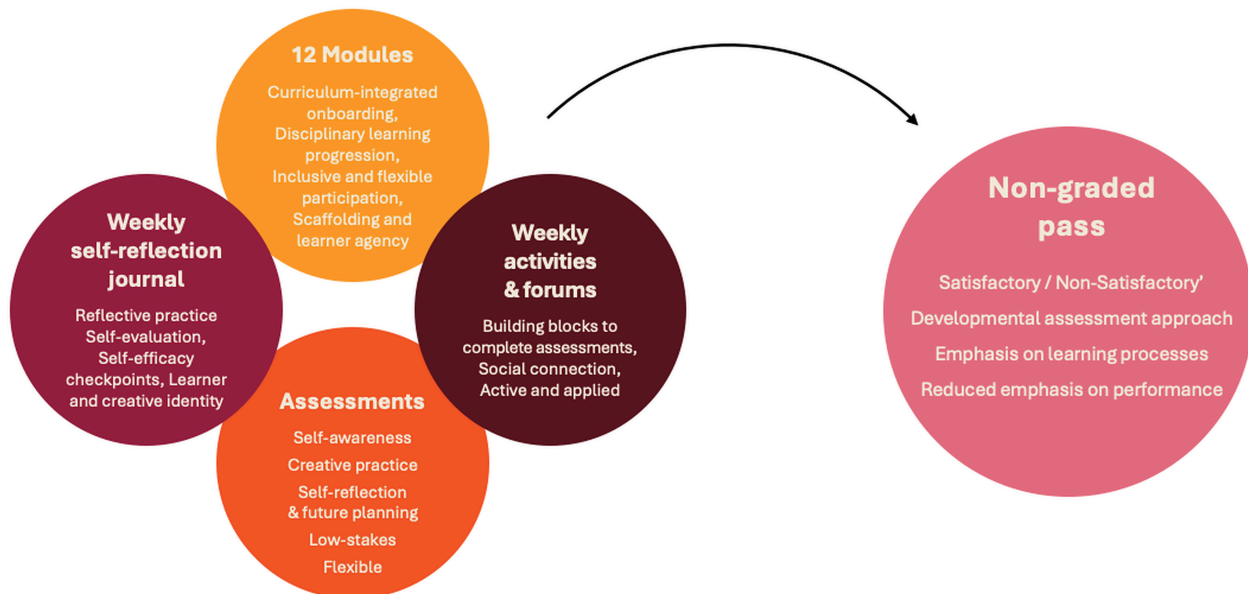
Assessment 1: Discover your why

Guided by the framework's emphasis on self-evaluation, self-efficacy, and sense of purpose during transition, this early assessment invited students to reflect on their motivations, strengths, challenges, support networks, and goals. Students completed a low-stakes self-evaluation using an adapted Lean Canvas framework to explore emerging learner and designer identities and identify strategies for navigating their transition to higher education.

Assessment 2: Three cubes of curiosity

Aligned with the Design Foundations pillar, this assessment engaged students in experimentation, making, and

Figure 2
Learning Design Approach



reflection through a design project involving three cube-based artefacts exploring colour, design principles, and pattern. A complementary design journal documented visual research, feedback, iterative development, and reflection throughout the creative process.

Assessment 3: Designing your path

As a culmination of the framework's focus on reflection, self-efficacy, and future-focused capability development, this final assessment invited students to synthesise and evaluate their growth as learners and designers. Students completed a low-stakes personal development task combining a Personal Development Plan with a reflective artefact documenting their transition experiences. The assessment provided opportunities for self-evaluation, goal setting, and consideration of future academic and professional aspirations, while flexible response formats supported learner choice and agency.

Curriculum sequencing

The curriculum sequencing model (Figure 3) illustrates how transition-related themes, disciplinary learning, reflection, and assessment milestones were distributed across the 12-week trimester. Consistent with the framework, sequencing decisions progressively shifted emphasis from adjustment and learner development to disciplinary participation, reflection, and future planning.

Self-reflection and self-evaluation were embedded throughout the subject through weekly learning activities, the self-reflection journal, and assessment tasks, including structured self-efficacy checkpoints linked to the adapted U-Curve of Adjustment. These activities provided opportunities for students to monitor their adjustment, revisit transition challenges, and connect disciplinary experiences with emerging learner and designer identities.

Onboarding, support services, study and learning skills, self-evaluation activities, and onboarding knowledge checks were foregrounded during the early weeks to support adjustment to higher education and establish foundations for subsequent disciplinary learning.

Foundational design content was introduced from Week 3, enabling students to engage with transition activities, understand expectations, and develop confidence before undertaking more substantial disciplinary learning. As the trimester progressed, transition-related themes became

increasingly integrated with disciplinary learning and design practice.

Assessment milestones reflected the developmental progression of the curriculum, moving from self-awareness and transition planning to creative practice and disciplinary application, and finally to reflection, future planning, and personal development.

A dedicated reflection week was incorporated prior to the final assessment, providing a less content-intensive period during which students could consolidate learning, review progress, and prepare their final submission.

The latter stages of the curriculum emphasised growth, future study, and career planning, with the intention of encouraging students to connect their experiences with longer-term academic, professional, and creative aspirations.

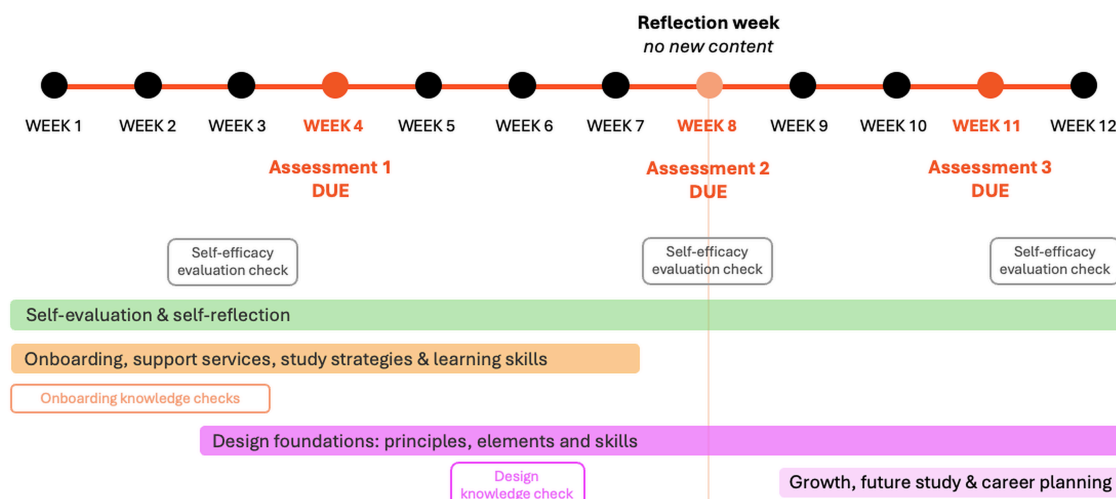
Initial implementation reflections

Implementation of Introduction to Design Studies across multiple offerings provided opportunities to reflect on the application of the framework within a large, multidisciplinary first-year design cohort. Rather than evaluating student outcomes, these reflections focus on curriculum design considerations and subsequent refinements.

Consistent with the curriculum principle of balancing learner agency with proactive support, implementation highlighted the challenges of calibrating choice and guidance during the early stages of transition. While learner choice was embedded throughout the curriculum, teaching team reflections and routine curriculum feedback indicated that some students experienced challenges navigating extensive autonomy during the early stages of transition. This informed greater use of exemplars, scaffolding, and progressively increasing independence.

Fostering belonging within a highly distributed learning environment also remained an ongoing challenge. Although peer interaction and collaborative learning were embedded throughout the curriculum, meaningful engagement in asynchronous contexts required continued attention, reinforcing the importance of intentionally designed opportunities for connection and community-building (Allen et al., 2024; Adlington et al., 2024).

Figure 3
12-week Curriculum Sequence: Integration of Themes and Assessments



Implementation also highlighted the diversity of prior educational and professional experiences within the cohort. For some students, transition-focused activities were initially perceived as orientation exercises rather than developmental learning experiences, prompting greater emphasis on communicating their purpose and the rationale for the competency-based assessment model.

Ongoing delivery informed iterative refinements to learning resources, assessment guidance, and accessibility features to improve clarity, flexibility, and participation across a diverse cohort studying in multiple modes. It also led to the introduction of an artificial intelligence-based *Socratic Reflection Mentor* to complement the weekly reflection journal by prompting students to reflect on their learning, goals, assumptions, and emerging identities while modelling ethical AI use.

Collectively, these reflections highlight the iterative nature of curriculum design and the importance of adapting curriculum, assessment, and support mechanisms in response to changing learner needs and contexts.

Limitations

This paper focuses on the design and implementation of a discipline-specific transition curriculum. Although institutional data informed ongoing curriculum review, ethical and governance constraints preclude the reporting of evaluative findings. Consequently, this paper does not claim effectiveness or causal impact. Future research with appropriate ethical approval is required to evaluate student outcomes.

Conclusion

This practice report responds to the question of how transition pedagogy can be integrated within authentic disciplinary learning. Through the redesign of a first-year design subject, a discipline-specific framework was developed that integrates transition support, learner development, and disciplinary learning within a coherent curriculum structure. The framework provides an example of how contextual characteristics, transition theory, and curriculum design principles can be translated into curriculum, assessment, learning activities, and student support strategies within a disciplinary context.

Initial implementation highlighted the practical complexities of integrating transition support, learner development, and disciplinary learning within a single curriculum experience. In particular, reflections from delivery underscored the importance of balancing learner agency with structured support, fostering belonging within distributed learning environments, accommodating diverse learner needs, and adapting curriculum approaches in response to changing contexts.

Although developed within a design education context, the framework is intentionally adaptable and may provide a foundation for adaptation across other disciplinary contexts. Future research undertaken with appropriate ethical approval may explore student experiences and outcomes associated with the framework and investigate how discipline-integrated transition approaches support learner development across the student lifecycle.

Declarations

Acknowledgements. None.

Funding. The author received no funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time provided by their institution.

Conflict of interest. The author declares that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

Ethics approval. Not required, as the activities described formed part of routine curriculum development, subject delivery, and quality assurance processes. Student feedback referenced in the report was collected through standard institutional evaluation mechanisms and is reported in aggregate form.

Generative AI disclosure. The author acknowledges the use of Grammarly and Copilot for proofreading and refining the text of this manuscript. The tools assisted in improving clarity, grammatical accuracy, and consistency throughout the document.

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Author Biography

Elicia Simon is a higher education leader with expertise in learning and teaching, academic development, and curriculum innovation across online, blended, and face-to-face environments. Her scholarship focuses on first-year transition, employability, work-integrated learning, and industry-connected education, with a particular focus on designing authentic learning experiences that foster student belonging, agency, and professional identity development.

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