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Examining decolonisation in global higher education: addressing another social contract breach in the absence of enduring institutional redress

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ABSTRACT

Decolonisation is not a specific issue to higher education, but it is a particular one because of the imperative for higher education to act as a global public good. This systematic literature review examines global literature addressing decolonisation over the past five years. It finds decolonisation efforts are undertaken by a passionate few *without* sustained, systemic institutional support. Globalised academic practices continue to perpetuate white hegemony and futurity. This study positions a missing theme in decolonisation research; the analysis and evaluation of the systematic efforts institutions themselves expend in redressing and deconstructing coloniality embedded in operational structures, practices, and cultures.

Introduction

The ideological crisis of higher education calls for the broken social contract of higher education to be (re)negotiated, or imaged anew (Harper and Saltmarsh 2024; Maassen 2014; Macfarlane 2024). The advancement and uplifting of historically disenfranchised and marginalised individuals and societies forms part of this call; 'Any new social contract between higher education and society must confront … both the aspirations of equality and unequal reality that are at the foundation of higher education's place in society' (Harper and Saltmarsh 2024, 6). Decolonisation focuses on this aspect of the social contract of higher education by dismantling colonial structures to address the historical injustices, racism, and inequalities (Adam 2020). It provides a pathway back to reviving the indigenous cultures, restoring rightful sovereignty, and promoting economic independence (Ndhlovu 2022).

Broadly speaking, the concept of decolonisation addresses the various efforts to withstand or unravel the intertwined structures, processes, and outcomes resulting from colonisation. It seeking alternative, just, and inclusive futures (Woldegiorgis 2021). As Shahjahan et al. (2021, 83) also note, decolonisation acknowledges the constraints of monoculture in terms of 'whose ways of knowing are privileged in existing histories, policies, practices, methodologies and/or theories, and addressing them in the curriculum and pedagogy'.

Institutions of the global north have always been places where the knowledges of the global south are appropriated, accumulated, theorised, and published (Connell 2019). Western knowledge and perspectives disregard first nations knowledges (Fúnez-Flores 2023; Mills 2022). Global north institutions continue to dominate global university rankings and perpetuate colonial narratives

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(Kennedy, McGowan, and El-Hussein 2023), normalising and reinforcing white hegemony (Adefila et al. 2022). Increasing globalisation and internationalisation of higher education only serves to strengthen this (Deem 2001; Marginson 2007). Despite many calls, the deeply embedded colonial foundations of higher education persist (Kadam and Frempong 2025; Waghid 2020).

Western academic practices are seen as the most desirable practices, and when adopted, hold the greatest promise of academic success (Chatio et al. 2023; Lewis and Shore 2018). Successive new generations of academics are lulled into the false sense that this is what academia is – there is no alternative. While students from minority ethnic backgrounds continue to experience racism, 'othering', and struggle to belong (for example Ali 2022; Hall, Gill, and Gamsu 2022; Jones 2017). For some students, the experience of returning home once they have graduated continues to carry the harm of white hegemony. For example Xu et al. (2024) found that when returning home, Chinese international student alumni from western universities self-identified as 'Haifei' (loosely translated as 'overseas returning wastes') because they viewed their future prospects in China with pessimism, having spent significant time out of the country.

The good done through decolonising actions is also known. Incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into curriculum recognises the value of these systems and their contributions towards sustainability and development (Hall, Ansley, and Connolly 2023; Lugosi, Patrie, and Cromwell 2023; Luke and Heynen 2021). Students from colonised or marginalised communities see their identities, cultures and histories reflected and valued in the academic environment, fostering a sense of empowerment, pride, and belonging (Hall, Ansley, and Connolly 2023; Woldegiorgis 2021). Students from colonised nations reconnect with their heritage and develop a more comprehensive understanding of their history, culture, language, and identity, allowing them to engage more confidently in their education (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022). While confronting existing white power structures means students from diverse backgrounds can succeed academically as fairness and access to opportunities are renewed (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022; Dawson 2020; Hall, Ansley, and Connolly 2023). Despite knowing all this, efforts to decolonise higher education appear systematically insubstantial. Macfarlane (2024) points to unsubstantial decolonisation as one of the liberal values contributing to the current ideological crisis of higher education. Given the significant implications colonisation has on our highly internationalised higher education systems, this systematic literature review has been conducted to understand the most recent experiences of (de)colonisation and how institutions may or may not be intentionally acting upon its redress.

Method

A systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of a state of knowledge in a particular field. To uphold rigour, this study adopts the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) methodology for identifying, searching, and selecting the articles included in this corpus (Page et al. 2021).

Data sources and search process

The search was deliberately broad, using the search keywords 'higher education' AND 'decoloni*', to be found in abstracts and key words. The use of the Boolean search logic '*' when searching for decolonisation ensures that American and English spelling of the word were captured, as well as all derivatives. The broadness of the term 'higher education' also captured studies addressing universities and colleges. The review identified research related to keyword searches over five years from 2019 and 2024. This timeframe was chosen to ensure the most recent developments in decolonisation in higher education was captured.

This review included 3 databases: ProQuest, Emerald Insight, and Web of Science. These databases were chosen because of their broad, multidisciplinary positioning. An initial review of results revealed that 2 highly reputable international Q1 higher education journals were absent.

Subsequently, additional searches were conducted in the journal databases of Studies in Higher Education and Higher Education Quarterly.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The initial searches identified 2230 records. After the removal of duplicate records and those not matching inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1), there were 596 records in the corpus. Given the number of records removed at this first screening, a point of saturation was established.

After a further review of titles and abstracts, an additional 307 records were removed as they also did not match inclusion and exclusion criteria. There were 289 articles sought for retrieval, of which 11 were not retrievable. A subsequent review found 8 reports that did not match the inclusion and exclusion criteria, leaving 270 studies eligible for inclusion (see Figure 1).

Analysis

Each study was read three times by each author to analyse emerging themes. The different positionality of each researcher (one a Caucasian, Australian woman in her middle career; and the other a Fijian woman, in her early career with lived experiences of being an international student) was recognised. Peer debriefing and reflexive team meetings were used as bracketing mechanisms to manage potential biases (Creswell 2013).

The corpus of 270 studies showed similar numbers of publications across each year. The types of studies included were predominantly conceptual, followed by empirical studies, while systematic literature reviews accounted for the smaller portion ($n = 9$ studies). Of the empirical studies, qualitative research methods were most dominate. A smaller proportion of the studies utilise quantitative methods. Mix-method approaches were also present.

Regionality was an important feature of the corpus. Studies that focused on certain countries were understandably those with strong colonial histories, most notably South Africa, United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (Figure 2).

Findings

To begin this section, the emerging themes are presented as they apply to the superordinate themes of higher education broadly, knowledge creation and dissemination, and the separate lived experiences of academics or students. The number of manuscripts contributing to the theme is presented alongside example studies for each theme (see Table 2).

From the perspective of higher education systems

As Ahmet (2021, 153) establishes, the call to decolonise higher education is a call to 'stop the pain'. As such, decolonisation is quite rightly considered to be the ethical, moral, and socially justice action institutions need to undertake in order to address persisting coloniality across coloniser and colonised education systems, theories and processes (Ahmet 2021; Naidoo 2024; Taylor and Reddick 2020). Adefila et al. (2022) found that embedded globalised and internationalised practices in higher

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion
• Q1 journals, ensuring peer review (as per the Scimago website, viewed April, 2025) • Empirical studies/ Conceptual papers • Written in English	• Articles that are not peer reviewed (case studies, reports, magazine articles, etc)/ Less than Q1 • Conference papers/ Editorials • Articles NOT in English
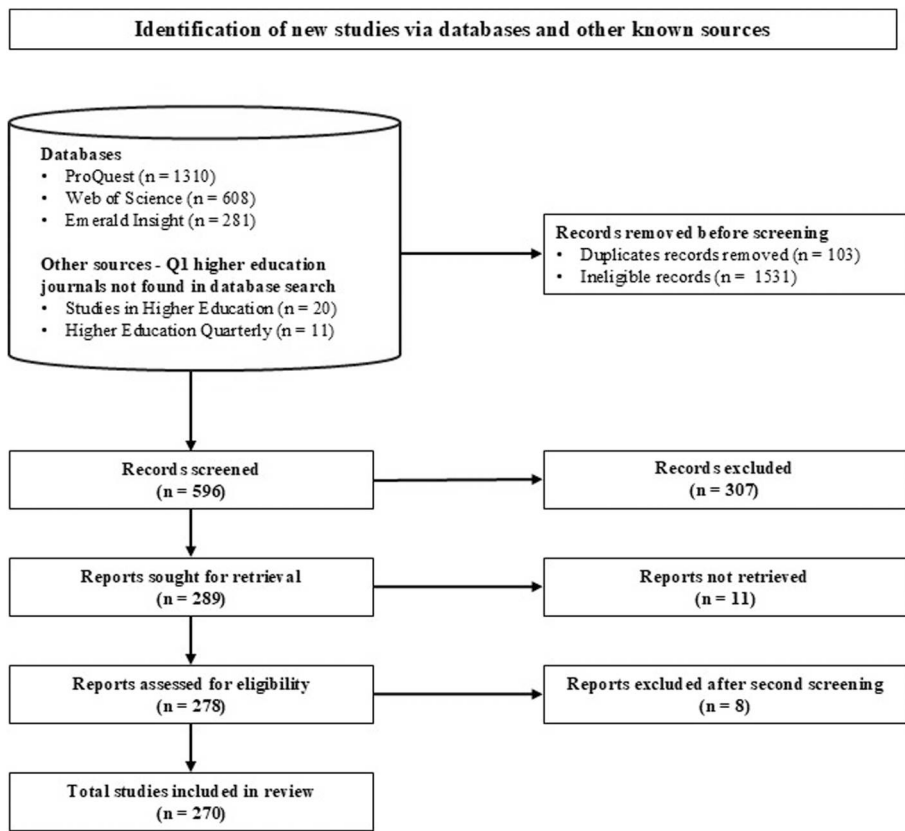
Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart adapted from Page et al. (2021).

education systems continue to reinforce whiteness as futurity. The logic of meritocracy used in the anglosphere universities to justify white superiority impedes the social mobility of racialized individuals through exclusion and marginalisation of aspiring faculty and students (Regmi 2023).

Figure 2. Global distribution of published studies.

Table 2. Substantial themes, including no. of corpus manuscripts per theme.

	Substantial themes		Example studies from the corpus
Higher Education Systems			
Broadly	Decolonisation is an ethical, moral, and socially justice action that HE providers need to undertake to address persisting coloniality across coloniser and colonised education systems, theories, curriculum and processes.	N = 67	Adefila et al. (2022); Naidoo (2024); Taylor and Reddick (2020); Gatwiri and Mapedzahama (2022); Barnett and Guzmán-Valenzuela (2022); Regmi (2023); Ahmet (2021); Luckett and Naicker (2019); Yenjela (2021)
	The globalisation/ internationalisation of higher education reinforces whiteness as futurity.	N = 34	Shahjahan and Edwards (2022); Chatterjee and Barber (2021); Heleta and Chasi (2023); R'Boul (2022); Thondhlana et al. (2021); Stein (2021); Marginson (2022); Fúnez-Flores (2023); Mills (2020); Regmi (2023)
	Grass roots social movements and racially or politically motivated events compel institutions to recognise coloniality	N = 28	Housee (2022); Antia and Chanel van der (2019); K. Thomas and Ashburn-Nardo (2020); Hall, Ansley, and Connolly (2023); Sunnemark and Thörn (2023); Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter (2020); Daniel and Platzky Miller (2024); Griffiths (2019)
Knowledge creation and dissemination	Indigenous ways of knowing disrupt western-based schools of thought.	N = 35	Locke, Trudgett, and Page (2023); Waghid (2020); Seats (2022); Leenen-Young et al. (2021); Kennedy, McGowan, and El-Hussein (2023); Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas (2021); Mafile'o, Kokinai, and Redman-MacLaren (2022); Marker (2019); Synot et al. (2021)
	Decolonisation efforts exist in siloed fields of education, generally led by impassioned academic champions.	N = 33	Lin (2023); Lundén (2023); Adewumi and Mitton (2022); Schucan Bird and Pitman (2020); Dillon and Pritchard (2022); Grogan, Hollinsworth, and Carter (2021); Choat, Wolf, and O'Neill (2024); Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2022); Rai and Campion (2022); Elhinnawy (2023)
	Teaching and learning indigenous ways of knowing requires safe spaces (free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations).	N = 23	Anderson and Riley (2021); Hook and Jessen (2022); Stein (2020); Wimpenny et al. (2022); Menon et al. (2021)
Lived experiences			
Academics	Academics identifying as first nations peoples and from minority ethnic backgrounds in predominately 'white' universities experience emotional pain, taking up space, being 'othered', having capital deficit, and career disadvantage.	N = 19	Ahmet (2021); Daly and Shah (2022); Smith et al. (2022); Dana El (2023); Arday (2022); Steinman and Sánchez (2023); Gifford and McEachern (2021); Doharty, Madriaga, and Joseph-Salisbury (2021); Naepi (2021)
Students	The experience of assimilation into predominately white institutions leaves students who identify as First Nations, Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) feeling silenced – whiteness is normalised.	N = 20	Ajibade and Hayes (2022); Matthews and Dollinger (2023); Briscoe and Jones (2022); Alejandro et al. (2020); Nkoala (2020); Squire (2020); Hogarth (2022); Bunce et al. (2021); Crombie et al. (2024); Dillon and Pritchard (2022); Pryce-Miller et al. (2023); D.S.P. Thomas and Quinlan (2023); Sakata, Winston-Proctor, and Harris (2023); Ali (2022); Hall, Gill, and Gamsu (2022)
	Students identifying as Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) experience mistreatment as a result of ethnicity: racism, discrimination, and hatred on campus.	N = 11	Crombie et al. (2024); Dillon and Pritchard (2022); Pryce-Miller et al. (2023); D.S.P. Thomas and Quinlan (2023); Sakata, Winston-Proctor, and Harris (2023); Ali (2022); Hall, Gill, and Gamsu (2022)

Grass roots movements confront entrenched coloniality

In national higher education systems, grass roots social movements and racially or politically motivated events compel institutions to face deeply entrenched coloniality and its cascading contribution to racism, violence, discrimination, and inequality on campus (Daniel and Platzky Miller 2024). As an example, in 2015 and 2016, the ideological #Rhodesmustfall student protests started at the University of Cape Town. Students called for the decolonisation of education in post-apartheid South Africa. Collective action spread to other institutions across the country, and globally (Daniel and Platzky Miller 2024). In solidarity for the 'global field of decolonial politics', students at Oxford University protested the presence of statues of Cecil Rhodes, calling for them to be dismantled (Sunnemark and Thörn 2023, 53). #Rhodesmustfall, gave rise to the #Feesmustfall movement which called for free, decolonised education in South Africa. This movement then brought about #Afrikaans-MustFall, which called for a revision of language policy in South African universities that kept English and Afrikaans as co-official languages (Antia and Chanel van der 2019).

Further efforts to address racism occurred in anglosphere universities in the United Kingdom. Hall, Ansley, and Connolly (2023, 3) reported targeted programmes aimed at facilitating discursive space and practices where faculty and students could actively engage with decolonising efforts as a reaction to 'necessary-but-limited' responses to social movements inside universities. In the United States of America, the #Blacklivesmatter social movement compelled institutions to confront white supremacy in the academy, particularly in the development and mentoring of minority graduate students who were oppressively disadvantaged (K. Thomas and Ashburn-Nardo 2020).

Knowledge creation and dissemination

The importance of indigenous ways of knowing is acknowledged as disrupters of western based schools of thought. As applied to curriculum, Locke, Trudgett, and Page (2023) recognised indigenous early career researchers as vital and capable in the development of diverse curriculums, new research approaches, and methodologies because they in particular bring standpoints that promote resistance to dominant western based knowledges. Kennedy, McGowan, and El-Hussein (2023) worked with indigenous elders to show that dominating white academic privilege is maintained when boundaries exist that defend and protect white knowledge and expertise. While in the African context, Waghid (2020) showed *ubuntu* (the African philosophy of one who is authentic, generous, hospitable, and understands their humanity is inextricably bound to others as part of a greater world that should be free of humiliation, diminishment, torture and oppression) offered practices that could build social responsibility, deliberate engagement, and attentiveness to 'otherness' in higher education.

In the context of teaching and learning, indigenous ways of knowing requires safe spaces free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations. For Stein (2020) this involved institutions being honest about confronting their complicity in colonisation for the sake of settler-indigenous relationships. Anderson and Riley (2021) discussed the need for academics and students from diverse backgrounds to be purposeful in their pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning about racism and intersectionality to build cultural competence. In a similar way Wimpenny et al. (2022) showed that European academics are more aware of their own role in the ongoing white futurity of higher education as internationalisation of higher education increases. This opens space for them to confront and renew their own efforts to understand and redress their own colonised behaviours and attitudes.

These efforts are generally led by impassioned academic champions rather than purposeful, systematic institutional effort. Examples of decolonising actions such as analysis of reading lists to remove bias towards white, male, Eurocentric authors, or the inclusion of videoed stories that privileged indigenous voices were undertaken by academics with a moral imperative to advance decolonisation in their sphere of influence (Grogan, Hollinsworth, and Carter 2021; Schucan Bird and Pitman 2020).

These individualised efforts meant decolonisation actions occurred in siloed fields of education such as geography, history, allied health, criminology, etc (Dillon and Pritchard 2022; Elhinnawy 2023; Rai and Campion 2022). Lin (2023) established that racist ideologies remain in disciplines such as health sciences, computer science and information technology, sports, business, and religion.

Lived experiences

Research into the working and study lives of academics and students in colonised universities reveal lived experiences are marred by racism, discrimination, violence, mistreatment, and 'othering'. The ongoing experiences of academics and students mirror each other in a number of ways.

From the perspectives of academics

For academics identifying as first nations peoples and from minority ethnic backgrounds in predominately 'white' universities, their experiences were described as ones of emotional pain, 'taking up space', being 'othered', having capital deficit, and career disadvantage. In the context of UK higher education. Ahmet (2021, 157–158) described the painful experiences of black and minority ethnic academics feeling uncomfortable because of diversity policies described as instilling white fragility through 'white generosity' by *allowing* these academics to work within predominately white institutions. They described discomfort in being treated like 'pet projects' and feeling as though they were 'taking up space'. The study by Arday (2022) revealed academics of black, Asian, Latin-American and mixed heritage felt power and authority was used as oppressive instruments against them that maintained inequality. They felt an overall sense of cultural naivety, insensitivity, and discrimination that placed frustrating burdens on them to continually explain and forcibly justify racialized experiences. As Asian American women, Daly and Shah (2022) felt compelled to push back against the stereotype of being seen as quiet and submissive in order to take their rightful place amongst their white (and often white male) colleagues, without constant scrutiny and surveillance.

From the perspective of students

Students identifying as First Nations, and Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) continue to experience mistreatment in the form of racism, discrimination, and hatred on campus. Crombie et al. (2024) found that medical students in South Africa reported mistreatment involving offensive gestures, and verbal abuse in efforts to exclude them. The most distressing part of this study was that these experiences were perpetrated by university registrars and medical school staff. D.S.P. Thomas and Quinlan (2023) found that BAME students had significantly fewer academic interactions compared to white students, mainly attributed to power imbalances in the classroom. They lacked a sense of belonging to their university attributed to predominantly white faculty members, exclusive curriculum, and racially divided inter-group interactions.

The experience of assimilation into predominately white institutions leaves First Nations and BAME students feeling silenced, because whiteness remains normalised. Bunce et al. (2021) showed that these students struggled to reach their full potential because the need for relatedness, competency, and autonomy are not met. Nkoala (2020) found a continuing predominant monolingual culture in higher education in South Africa, reflective of the #AfrikaansMustFall student movement. While Matthews and Dollinger (2023) showed that the harm of 'othering' is perpetuated when student representatives speak on behalf of minority students. Briscoe and Jones (2022) showed that in the area of student affairs, whiteness continues to be normalised through perpetuation of colour evasive and race-neutral responses to racialized incidents.

Implications for higher education as a global public good

The issue of decolonisation is not a specific issue to higher education, but it is a particular one because of the imperative of higher education to serve as a global public good and as a significant society mechanism to improve ways and standards of living (Apple et al. 2022; Marginson, Yang, and Brotherhood 2024). The themes emerging from this study reinforce decolonisation as worthy of its status as a driver of some of the world's wickedest problems; racism, inequality, violence, and unequal access to education (United Nations 2015). To return to the central justification for this study, emergent themes show that the harm of colonisation continues to persist. So whilst decolonisation may feel doable and achievable, it is contingent on openly and radically questioning the structures, cultures and institutional practices that keep coloniality deeply woven into the fabric of institutions (Hall, Ansley, and Connolly 2023).

Sunnemark and Thörn (2023) positioned three general research themes addressing decolonisation in higher education; the examination of colonial features and legacy; the need to dismantle colonial structures within education, and the evaluation of decolonising pedagogies; and the social and political initiatives for decolonisation of higher education. We position a fourth interconnected theme emerging from this study; the analysis and evaluation of the systematic, efforts institutions themselves expend in deconstructing colonial culture embedded in operational structures, and practices.

At the institutional level

Colonisation manifests in harms such as racism, discrimination, and inequality. All institutions will rightly advise they have policies and procedures in place to mitigate these issues as part of their regulatory requirements. This study shows decolonisation is mixed into institutional conversations and efforts about more than just decolonisation. But this tautological problem should not be allowed to absolve institutions from a lack of demonstrable actions towards decolonisation.

In this body of literature, systematic institutional efforts are opaque. Rather, decolonising efforts are undertaken by passionate academic champions, alone and seemingly with limited systemic institutional support. It remains unclear what institutions are proactively doing from an administrative perspective to decolonise their operational structures, and organisational cultures. There is clear evidence that institutions respond to social movements and political events. But once the movement or event has passed, any long-lasting efforts on institutional decolonisation remains unknown.

Popular advice to corporations wishing to confront their colonial foundations is to research their history, pledge to be anti-racist, be allies against exploitation, exclusion, and disadvantage, continually improve through purposeful continuous improvement to governance, policy, and business practices (Twumasi, Horne, and Rodriguesz 2020). Each of these actions can be translated into measurable, trackable actions. If we transfer this advice from corporations to higher education institutes, these actions are not solely academic ones. They involve governance and institutional operations as well. They are not actions that can be left up to passionate individuals to enact alone. They are actions that require institutions to be activated in their pursuit of decolonisation, and which sit at the executive institutional levels of governance, strategy, and planning.

They are also measurable actions in the sense that the impact to the university community can be evaluated, so that good practice can be shared across global education systems. For instance, in hiring and promotion practices, enrolment and marketing, or even remediations in removing colonised artefacts from campuses, marketing, and heraldry. Evaluating and demonstrating impact would compel institutions to act if the lasting impact of decolonising actions on the university community is known, and can form the case for necessary institutional resourcing.

At the research level

Adefila et al. (2022, 263) made a particular point of refusing to 'dignify' a controversial paper which made a positive case for colonisation, highlighting that 'overtly colonial arguments are still

legitimated in academia' through publication biases and policy discourse. A situation that needs more critical self-reflection. This study is itself colonised because of the inclusion criteria of publications in Quartile 1 (Q1) journal and in English. Whilst this is a legitimate practice when collating a corpus for examination, it has to be recognised that these Q1 articles, written in English, are internationalised and westernised, despite indigenous words like *ubuntu* being included in the tiles (Adefila et al. 2022). This is a colonised positioning that Chatio et al. (2023) found in their study of the publishing choices of Ghanaian academics which favoured international, Q1 journals because local journals were considered 'low quality' in comparison. Choosing the 'wrong' journal was considered to have significant negative implications on career progression, that in short means 'international publication records were what mattered most' (Chatio et al. 2023, 11).

Kennedy, McGowan, and El-Hussein (2023, 102) offered their structure of Kimma Pi Pitsin (Kindness, compassion, teachings) as a means of engaging indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. As they state, 'academics need to engage in messy decolonization processes and hold ourselves accountable to implement the calls to action so we may move forward in a good way'. But whilst academic success continues to be built on the privilege of white (and global north) research practices, such calls to actions may be hard to discern. As Chatio et al. (2023) poignantly demonstrates, academics new to academia are indoctrinated into this thinking about white futurity if they are to be successful, perpetuating the impression that this is how academia should be. Reform in this regard sits with the collective actions of ranking hungry institutions and higher education systems. Individual academics need the might of radical structural and cultural reforms to make headway into this dominance structure.

Concluding remarks – another symptom of higher education's broken social contract

Although colonisation is a wicked problem with centuries long history, it is feasible to consider the evidenced lack of systematic institutional redress as another breach of higher education's social contract. Higher education is a function of society that builds national sovereign capability, prosperity, and upward mobility for individuals and communities. This is why federal governments of the day are keenly focused on increasing access to higher education (for example Australian Universities Accord 2024; Rainford 2020; Shah, Bennett, and Southgate 2015). But that study shows that executive level systematic and operational decolonising efforts appear missing. In this way, higher education institutions are lagging behind corporates, when arguably they should be leading.

The globalised higher education industry has placed foreign, white education on such a pillar that it is now seen as the desirable kind. Global south contributions are secondary to global north. The dominating narrative is that academic success can only be found in westernised higher education institutions, practices, and epistemologies. This study has shown that institutions have still not fully accepted their obligations to be purposeful in their efforts to decolonise, treating it as a nice to have. When it needs to be a *must have* if higher education is to begin to mend its broken social contract.

Disclosure statement

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