Futures Reimagined: Decolonising Curriculum for Inclusive and Sustainable Education

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study critically examines the intersection of decolonisation, inclusivity, and sustainability within higher education curricula. Amidst growing calls to decolonise academic content, institutions often adopt inclusive strategies without fully addressing underlying systemic inequities. Drawing on critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework, this research employs a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys with students, educators, and policymakers. Findings reveal that while there is increasing awareness of the need for intercultural competence and inclusive practices, implementation often lacks depth, inadvertently perpetuating existing disparities. The study highlights the importance of holistic, community-engaged approaches that prioritise compassion and collegiality, fostering a sense of belonging among diverse student populations. Recommendations include policy reforms, curriculum redesign, and stakeholder collaboration to create equitable and sustainable educational environments. This work contributes to reimagining higher education as a transformative space for inclusive and sustainable futures.

Full paper

Introduction
In response to increasing global challenges around sustainability, equity and cultural diversity, higher education institutions are being called to reimagine their pedagogical practices. Amidst narratives that portray higher education as elitist or disconnected from societal needs (Kromydas, 2017), this paper argues for a compassionate, collegial and community-rooted reconfiguration of curriculum and practice. Decolonising sustainability education offers a powerful mechanism to challenge dominant discourses and reposition higher education as an inclusive, transformative force for societal good (Lotz-Sisitka, 2017; Khoo & Jørgensen, 2021).

Theoretical Framework
Grounded in critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and sustainability education, this study explores how university curricula often reflect historical and cultural perspectives that prioritise dominant worldviews while marginalising others (Shahjahan et al., 2022). This imbalance can hinder inclusivity and create barriers to participation for students from culturally diverse backgrounds. By centring compassion and intercultural understanding in curriculum design, the study considers how teaching practices can foster inclusive learning environments, support cultural awareness, and help students feel respected and represented.

Critical pedagogy (Monchinski, 2008) positions students as active participants in their learning, rather than passive recipients. Combined with postcolonial approaches, it encourages educators to reflect on the cultural assumptions that shape how sustainability is taught and understood (Greer, 2020; Hutchinson et al., 2023). While UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework has advanced the integration of sustainability into education, it can frame sustainability as a technical issue rather than one rooted in lived experience and cultural context (UNESCO, 2020). A more inclusive approach is needed—one that values diverse knowledge systems, promotes critical thinking, and prepares students to respond with compassion and cultural sensitivity to global challenges.

Research Questions
This paper addresses two key questions:

1. How can sustainability education be decolonised to ensure inclusivity and cultural sensitivity in diverse higher education contexts?
2. What challenges and opportunities exist in integrating decolonised sustainable education into institutional practices and curricula?

Methodology
The study uses a mixed-methods approach to examine the integration of decolonised sustainability education in UK and international higher education contexts. The qualitative component includes semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis of university policies and curricula. Participants include students, academics, policymakers, and community stakeholders from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In parallel, the quantitative element comprises student surveys designed to assess attitudes toward sustainability, intercultural competence, and inclusivity before and after exposure to targeted educational interventions. A thematic analysis of qualitative data and statistical analysis of survey responses together offer a multidimensional view of institutional readiness, student experiences, and systemic barriers to implementing culturally responsive sustainability education.

Findings and Discussion
Preliminary findings reveal a gap between institutional aspirations and the practical

implementation of decolonised sustainability education. Many universities endorse ESD principles in policy but fail to embed them holistically into teaching. Students reported that sustainability was often presented in siloed modules, lacking engagement with indigenous knowledge, historical context, or ethical dimensions (Ajmal et al., 2017).

Educators reported challenges including institutional constraints, limited resources, and uncertainty about how to implement decolonisation effectively (Sorkos and Hajisoteriou, 2021). However, good practice emerged through interdisciplinary collaboration and student partnerships that enabled co-creation of culturally inclusive curricula (Nasri et al., 2021). These cases highlighted how compassion and collegiality can nurture inclusive learning cultures.

The study suggests that decolonising sustainability education requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion to restructuring knowledge systems and learning environments (Takhar, 2023). This includes recognising diverse ways of learning, engaging students as partners in curriculum co-design, and developing critical reflexivity among staff and learners.

Through staff training, inclusive leadership, and participatory curriculum design, universities can create spaces where students feel seen, valued, and empowered to contribute to sustainable solutions. Moreover, by collaborating meaningfully with local communities and engaging those historically excluded from higher education, universities can begin to address systemic inequities and demonstrate their social responsibility in tangible, locally relevant ways.

Conclusion and Expected Outcomes
The study aims to generate evidence-based recommendations for embedding decolonised, inclusive and sustainable principles across higher education. Anticipated outcomes include:

- Practical strategies for culturally sensitive, critically engaged curriculum design
- Insights into how sustainability education develops students' intercultural competence
- Policy recommendations for implementing holistic ESD frameworks
- A model for collaborative curriculum development that centres marginalised voices

Ultimately, the research calls for a compassionate and systemic rethinking of how higher education serves students, communities, and society. In doing so, it contributes to reimagining higher education not merely as a space for skill development, but as a transformative space for ethical, inclusive, and sustainable futures.