Decolonial practices in higher education: Student perspectives in Iceland

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ABSTRACT

While universities in postcolonial nations like India and South Africa have been engaged in decolonising curricula in higher education for several decades, universities in Europe have largely not progressed beyond integrating postcolonial scholarship into their curricula, to a genuine decolonisation of curricula in the Fanonian sense of '[changing] the order of the world' (Fanon, 1963, p.36). Indigenous scholars, activists and researchers in the Nordic region have analysed the denial of colonial histories and the production of Nordic exceptionalism (Belle, 2019; Kuokkanen, 2019; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2021; McEachrane, 2018). Yet, colonial history is often not taught in universities as a mandatory subject (Drugge, 2019; Njau, 2018). This lack puts an enormous gap in the knowledge base of students and knowledge workers in higher education and the broader community's understanding of knowledge production. Through focus group interviews conducted in 2024 with students from the school of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences and participatory action collaboration, we collected and analysed student perspectives on the place, necessity, and pedagogy of decolonialism at the university of Iceland.

KEY WORDS

DECOLONISING HIGHER EDUCATION, PEDAGOGY, CURRICULUM, RACE, COLONIAL HISTORY, WHITENESS

> I mean to begin a conversation and a project of collaborative, participatory, research and popular education to begin to see in its details the long sense of the processes of the colonial/gender system enmeshed in the coloniality of power into the present, to uncover collaboration, and to call each other to reject it in its various guises as we recommit to communal integrity in a liberatory direction.
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> -Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," 2008
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> "You can't just, I don't know, start in the middle of history and try to explain how the Western world got so powerful without explaining where they stole their resources from."
>
> -Student in literary studies, 2024

INTRODUCTION: DECOLONIALISM, GENDER, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Decolonisation and education form an unsettling pairing. Efforts toward decolonisation in education take diverse forms worldwide, emphasising commitment to Indigenous knowledge, land rights, and interrogating teaching materials and practices for silences, absences, misrepresentations, and erasures of the impact of European colonialism (Asher, 2017; Jain, 2015; Mbembe, 2016; Viswanathan, 1996). These omissions are part of the ongoing legacies of European colonisation and linked to how Enlightenment thinkers constructed what Aníbal Quijano called the "coloniality of power" (Quijano and Ennis, 2000). Postcolonial and decolonial scholars have analysed and critiqued how colonial practices shaped disciplines and how "omission" and "silence" are sustained by technologies of colonial "innocence" (Bakar-Langeland, 2025; Wekker, 2016). Decolonial labour examines colonial structures, how they are invisibilised and continue to shape how education is constructed, governed, assessed, and taught, how colonial perspectives become "knowledge" or accepted research data, which sustains unequal social systems (Tuck & Yang, 2012). These foundational assumptions affect who occupies the role of the educator, what we teach, and how and to whom knowledge is disseminated (Bhambra, 2014; Chasi, 2021).

While universities in postcolonial nations like India and South Africa have been working towards decolonising higher education for decades (Jansen 2019; Manathunga, 2020; Mbembe, 2016), universities in Europe have mostly not moved beyond absorbing postcolonial scholarship into academia toward decolonisation in the Fanonian sense of '[changing] the order of the world' (Fanon, 1963, p.36). In some cases, such work has been subsumed into familiar poststructural critiques without a sustained commitment to change or has even resulted in a "cooptation of critique" as a form of suppression (Eriksen & Svensen, 2020; Groglopo & Suárez-Krabbe, 2023). To address the deep influence of colonial structures on education, we need to fundamentally reconsider "the order of knowledge"; who teaches, the positionalities of students, what is taught, and the pedagogies used. It entails an interrogation of the historical biases and geo-political exigencies that underpin notions and constructions of knowledge (Chasi, 2021; Querejazu, 2016). A genuine decolonial turn in higher education would mean thoroughly restructuring educational materials, spaces, and structures – going beyond surface syllabus revisions or more inclusive bibliographies. It also requires a reckoning with how academic institutions continually reproduce colonial power structures, shaping curricula and pedagogies, so that even disciplines committed to critiquing power risk reinforcing those structures if they do not reckon with colonial legacies.

The imbrications of gender and the colonial enterprise and their mutual impacts have been well studied over the past few decades (Félix de Souza & Selis, 2023; Ghosh, 2004; Lugones, 2023; Oyewumi, 2002; Spivak, 1986;). Colonialism was gendered in its masculinised paternalism and the emasculation of its colonised peoples, and gender equations in colonies and imperial spaces were deeply impacted by colonial overlays of European/colonial ideas and gen-

der norms. We therefore see the work of feminism as inseparable from that of decoloniality and hold that they must be practiced as a single, integrated approach. We began this article with the words of decolonial feminist Maria Lugones who critically analysed how colonial hierarchies continue to reassign power to whiteness, even within spaces committed to feminism. In her analysis of the "coloniality of gender," she highlights the overrepresentation of white women whose theories fail to engage with racial or colonial structures, narrowing feminist critique to their own lived realities and in so doing continue to reproduce colonial structures in their critique:

> It is part of their history that only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. They were also understood to be animals in a sense that went further than the identification of white women with nature, infants, and small animals […] Erasing any history, including oral history, of the relation of white to nonwhite women, white feminism wrote white women large (Lugones, 2023, p. 52).

Lugones deepened Aníbal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power," showing how coloniality operates through gender relations alongside race and class, with women of colour and Indigenous women viewed as inferior by the same measures used by colonial masters towards colonised peoples. This coloniality of power persists in how knowledge is understood and produced today, shaping what counts as "knowledge," who decides, who is included in syllabi, and what is taught where and to whom. Lugones' insight that the gendering of colonial power is also the colonialism of gendered power underscores the need to continuously dismantle these power relations by radically questioning how knowledge is produced and disseminated in higher education. Thus, while policies on diversity and inclusion, including gender, are important for curriculum development, they neither guarantee equality nor necessarily reckon with colonial legacies (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018; Lay & Magnúsdóttir, 2024; Wekker, 2016).

We come to this work as two women, teachers, and researchers at the University of Iceland. Giti Chandra, born and raised in India, has extensive experience in teaching and researching colonial histories and decolonial feminist work, while Sólveig Sigurðardóttir, born and raised in Iceland, specialises in literature and histories of Nordic colonialism. We are committed to bringing decolonial feminism into our study of colonialism and higher education, especially into educational settings through our teaching and collaborations inside and outside the University. Giti Chandra launched a project at the University of Iceland to support discussions on decolonising curricula and pedagogy in the Schools of Social Science, Humanities, and Education, and to link these efforts with similar work across the Nordic region. Through individual meetings and sessions, faculty and researchers came together in workshops and seminars. While the project aims to initiate and lay groundwork for future collaborations, we recognise that the kind of radical "decolonial turn" we seek as decolonial feminists is beyond the current scope of the project, and that such change must come from staff, students, researchers, and faculty.

We recognise that within the University's strict hierarchy, lasting change must come through long-term collaboration among those who make up the institution. Over the past three years, we have therefore worked with students, staff, and faculty to explore the state of coloniality and decolonial approaches to education and action at the University. In 2024, we conducted eight focus group interviews with students from the Schools of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences, documenting their perspectives on how colonial history is taught and what they see as possible decolonial options within the University of Iceland (Eriksen & Svensen, 2020). While these collaborations continue, this article focuses on insights from discussions with our student collaborators.

The questions guiding our research build on the work of decolonial feminists, Indigenous scholars, and ac-

tivists in the Nordic region who have examined the denial of colonial histories and the production of Nordic exceptionalism. We find that any discussion of colonialism and the Nordic region must interrogate narratives portraying the nations of the region as "benevolent," exceptional, or even "nicer" than other European empires (Fjellheim, 2020; Hakon Lingner & Graugaard, 2022; Knobblock & Kuokkanen, 2015; Svendsen, 2020). Indeed, the Inuk/Kalaaleq artist Julie Edel Hardenberg has centred how the dominant projection of "nice" operates as a cultural artefact in Denmark, describing the colonial empire seeing itself as the "most humane among the inhumane" (Stien, 2023, np). Despite a rich tradition of colonial critique in the Nordic region, colonial history is often not a required subject in universities, and significant moves toward decolonisation have faced backlash (Olsson et al., 2024, SAIH). There remains, moreover, an urgent need to centre colonial analysis and challenge the "coloniality of gender" within Nordic education (Lugones, 2023).

This lacuna in high school and university curricula has not gone unnoticed, as our student collaborators at the University of Iceland repeatedly raised the lack of teaching on colonial histories and the continuing impact of European colonialism in their discussions. A key finding for us is the students' frustrations with how knowledge is presented in their disciplines. Importantly, these frustrations reveal their awareness of colonialism's societal impact and their own need for tools to analyse its influence on their fields. This aligns with their critique of the limited time devoted to contextualising the knowledge presented in class and the absence of multiple perspectives or insights from thinkers outside Western Europe and North America, a gap they often framed through the university's silence on the ongoing genocide in Palestine. Students noted a disconnect between what they learned about European colonial histories via social media and other online sources and what was taught in classrooms. The urgency of their frustration was also felt in the fact that they offered various suggestions for how the University of Iceland could work towards decoloniality with regard to curriculum.

THE ICELANDIC CONTEXT: COLONIALITY, INNOCENCE AND SILENCE

At the University of Iceland, histories of colonialism are not mandatory in curriculum, nor are educators broadly required to engage with decolonisation across disciplines. This aligns with many higher education institutions in the Nordic region (Bakar-Langeland, 2025; McEachrane, 2018). Such a substantial gap in students' and knowledge workers' understanding can affect how disciplines develop and what they offer communities (Höglund & Burnett 2019; Louie et al., 2017). The omission of Nordic colonial history from higher education, alongside neglect of Indigenous insights, is reflected in historian Gunlög Fur's (2013) analysis of Swedish educational materials that undermined or rendered Nordic colonialism suspect or "unthinkable". This violent unthinkability is also evident in studies of colonial legacies in the Icelandic context. Meanwhile, Indigenous thinkers have long demonstrated decolonial epistemic approaches, methodologies of cocreation, and mutual processes within academia (Graugaard & Lingner, 2022; Nutti, 2016; Svendsen, 2020; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

Coloniality in Iceland has been studied through the trope of Nordic exceptionalism, where Iceland's history as part of the Danish colonial empire is used to downplay the harm of coloniality within Icelandic society (Jensen & Loftsdóttir, 2022). Scholars have examined how colonialism intersected with nation-building, showing how thinkers of the nineteenth-century independence movement used racial ideologies to argue Iceland belonged among "civilized nations," merging whiteness with citizenship (Ellenberger, 2025; Halldorsdottir & Kjaran, 2019; Jóhannsson, 2003; Loftsdottir, 2012). Iceland has also marketed itself as a progressive, even leading, society in gender equality, which can be used to silence those that speak up about colonial and racist legacies in Icelandic society today (Halldórsdóttir & Gollifer, 2018; Tietgen, 2025). This view was also raised in the group discussions, along with the disproportionate amount of racist and sexist abuse faced by immigrant

women of colour. Meanwhile, studies show that the economic gap between native Icelanders and immigrants grows, and people of foreign origin in Iceland report elevated levels of discrimination based on origin, race, or ethnicity (Gísladóttir & Staub, 2024). Tracking Iceland's gender progress is a complex task given the strong link between whiteness and womanhood in equality discourses (Einarsdóttir, 2020).

To better understand how coloniality takes shape at the University of Iceland, we sought conversations with people working in and through the institution. We adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach, viewing knowledge production as a cocreation among multiple actors (Lenette, 2022), as opposed to the more extractivist mode of researcher/subject interaction. We chose PAR for its alignment with decolonial work rooted in community-based efforts to drive social change (Baum et al., 2006; Esterberg, 2002). As a commitment grounded in long-term collaboration, we write from within ongoing work with students, faculty, and staff about their perceptions of coloniality and decolonial efforts at the University of Iceland (Caxaj, 2015).

In this work, we aim to learn from knowledge makers – students, faculty, researchers, and others in academia – in and around the Nordic region who emphasise that confronting colonial structures requires far more than analysing the harm they cause; "decolonization requires more – a genuine overturn of existing hierarchies" (Junka-Aikio, 2016, np). We were also reminded that imposing a language or terminology on collaborators is itself a form of coloniality, as many of us work side by side across disciplines without a shared vocabulary. This involves pursuing systemic change (beyond individual research or activism) and addressing the persistent omissions, silences, and absence of Indigenous knowledge, epistemologies, and ontologies essential for truly decolonial education (Menon et al., 2021; Salinas, 2020).

GATHERING AT THE MARGINS OF THE IVORY TOWER

The project began with over a year of discussions between Chandra and research scholars and faculty about the absence of decolonial initiatives at the University. As one scholar connected her to others, Chandra assembled a group of faculty and senior researchers (master's and PhD level) from various disciplines interested in this work. Individual and group conversations evolved into workshops and seminars, fostering a sense of community and network building through wide-ranging, intensive discussions on understanding coloniality as a lived experience in Iceland and how the University is shaped by these colonial structures. After reaching out to teachers, we focused on students. Surveys and conversations revealed the need to balance faculty-dominated dialogues by archiving students' experiences of how colonial histories are taught at the University (Hansen, 2022). We saw the importance of creating a counter-archive to existing material and non-material archives of conventional wisdom, syllabi, best practices, bibliographies, accepted canons, 'fathers' of disciplines, and 'classic' texts that largely privilege Eurowestern, male, and colonially influenced scholars, theories, data, and ideologies without recognising or acknowledging this privileging.

The power differentials of bringing faculty and students together could have skewed or silenced some responses. Trying to avoid this, we reached out to all students in the Schools of Social Science, Humanities, and Education and organised eight focus groups. Sampling was carried out through invitations distributed through university email lists, its website, and word of mouth. We compiled ten groups of three to five participants each, coming from different disciplines. The discussions followed a semi-structured interview format: students received guiding questions but could discuss the topics freely. All groups were asked the same questions, though follow-up queries during the discussion varied by group.

Drawing on our understanding of the determinate universe of decolonial processes (Altheide, 1996), we aimed to use these discussions to collectively develop analytical categories that could inform future curriculum building, pedagogy, and research. We see this as an initial step in a complex socio-academic system where faculty and students occupy diverse raced, classed, abled, and gendered positions. We also recognise the potential challenges in classrooms largely staffed by Icelandic or other European faculty, while the student body better reflects Iceland's shifting racial demographics. By creating discussion opportunities for students to explore decolonial options, approaches, and visions for education, we hope to foster deeper institutional collaboration (Høiskar, 2020). Thus, while the immediate goal of these discussions was to gather insights on students' lived experiences, our broader aim is to move beyond description and develop theories and teaching plans with students, staff, and faculty, grounded in data through a contrapuntal analysis that "takes into account the perspectives of both the colonised and the coloniser, their interwoven histories, their discursive entanglements – without necessarily harmonising them or attending to one while erasing the other" (Garuba, 2015, para. 19).

Establishing trust and openness with our collaborators was a major concern. As a woman of colour from India in a predominantly white university, Chandra often reflected on how her presence might influence faculty or student responses on colonialism. How would answers differ if only Sigurðardóttir, who is racialised as white, were present? How did our roles as university teachers affect students' critiques of the institution? These power dynamics were evident in workshops and interviews. With faculty, our precarious employment may have shaped how seriously they engaged with us, while some students expressed an awareness of hierarchies by praising individual teachers and reflecting on the labour of teaching and specific burden on temporary faculty (Olsson et al., 2024). Other complexities included possible confirmation bias, and the likelihood that students who volunteered for these discussions were already inclined toward decolonial topics (Bernard, 2006).

To reduce the tension of what might feel like an interview where students were expected to give the right answers, we adopted a neutrally friendly stance, remaining encouraging listeners and receptive participants rather than expressionless observers. Eschewing the blank note-taker option, we acknowledged that the topic could evoke emotional or potentially traumatic responses and aimed to create a welcoming space where participants felt comfortable expressing their feelings. Sometimes a student asked for clarification of terms like coloniality or decolonialism, making it hard not to influence the conversation. Often, groups reached shared understandings of concepts such as "colonialism," "whiteness," and "decolonial" by drawing on prior studies, individual experiences, or social media, so the dialogue itself became a collaborative, reflexive process around vocabulary.

The following sections focus on three key questions we posed to the groups: do you feel there are gaps regarding colonial histories in your curricula; do you feel represented in your syllabi; and what practical suggestions do you have for addressing any gaps you identified? In our analysis, we pay close attention to the contexts in which students situated these questions and highlight common threads in their responses. We consider their language and recurring phrases as they explored ideas, offering our own careful reflections. Throughout, we have aimed to stay as true as possible to students' actual speech, preferring this to overediting for clarity or smoothing out the non-linearity and colloquialism of spontaneous conversation. For nearly all speakers, English was not their first language.

VISIBLE OMISSIONS: THE LACK OF COLONIAL HISTORY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A key theme that emerged was students' expression of feeling a lack of vocabulary to describe how colonialism has shaped their disciplines; as noted, some asked us to define or clarify the term. Most common-

ly, students said their fields did not address colonialism or colonial history directly, with the topic usually arising only when students themselves raised it in class. The word awkwardness came up often, signalling a shared sense that the topic might cause friction or strong emotions. In linguistics, one student highlighted the absence of deeper discussions on how languages develop and spread, and how colonialism underpins these processes. While recognising the harm this omission caused their field, the student felt conflicted about where to direct critique, noting – perhaps influenced by our presence – that university teachers are often precarious, overworked, and face many challenges. Still, they argued that education quality suffers without teaching colonial history and its impact on academia. Echoing Gloria Wekker's (2016) concept of white innocence, some students described teachers using harmful racial stereotypes, though most focused on the damage of silence regarding colonial history and/or racism. Another student took a stronger stance on the importance of teaching colonial history, and the difficulties teachers face, stating:

> "It's ridiculous how late I learned about this [...] Every department should have material on colonisation. If the department does not have a specialist, you can basically do an online lecture from all over the world, you have no excuse to not reach out and find somebody."

The sentiment of embarrassment came up repeatedly among white students born in Iceland when discussing the absence of colonial history in their university disciplines and earlier education. They noted either a complete lack of acknowledgment or that too little classroom time was devoted to meaningful discussion. This neglect led some to suspect information was deliberately omitted, creating distrust toward teachers and individual courses. Reflecting this impatience, one student remarked: "You can't just, I don't know, start in the middle of history and try to explain how the Western world got so powerful without sort of explaining where they stole their resources from." Another student from the Humanities lamented the absence of discussions on colonialism's influence on the field, pointing out that classes instead used euphemisms like "development":

> "[…] it influences everything like in our understanding of the world, if we understand how it was in the past and like who connects what and like how it happened, then we can understand better in today's world and like also in the politics, but also in linguistics like it's interesting from the point of view of language, like how colonisation influenced the language like local languages, how did colonisation change the African languages, how the Dutch in South Africa influenced the whole language and development there."

Noting there was "not really" any mention of colonisation in their curriculum, one student offered examples of how contemporary and historical cases could be incorporated into class. A student studying economics said the link between studying colonialism and economics was obvious, though its absence in his courses suggested otherwise. A student from the Humanities observed that while "colonisation" came up in classes relating to history or geography, it was their sense that it was treated as a distant past event: "like all this happened in seventeenth century... it's just like something that happened back then." This sense of disconnect between colonial history and the present echoes Gunlög Fur's (2013) analysis of history education in Sweden, where nation-state imaginaries shape the omission of colonial histories and their ongoing impact. However, as another student pointed out, this kind of compartmentalisation does not confront the turmoil of the present. "Unfortunately," she continued "it may be this is my personal opinion, but we are seeing it in our times right now. The colonisation happening in Palestine, unfortunately, yes, and people do not talk about it in the classroom." Furthermore, the feeling of being implicated in this unnarrated, unrecognised history is palpable; as a student from sociology put it: "everyone is like taking place in it, even if you're not affected by it."

This need to connect education with the present and with their own lives was evident in the discussions. Moving beyond the more obvious power structures such as race and nationality to gender, one student spoke of the intersections of marginalisations including sexuality and gender, saying that a decolonial perspective:

> "[…] would help minority groups a lot because like with trans people, people think that we just appeared in the past few decades not knowing that before WWII there was an active clinic in Germany and that was one of the first things destroyed by Nazis. Learning about colonialism also teaches us that trans groups have always existed."

As is clear from this statement, in the process of these discussions, we saw that some students had given the subject deep thought and were able to draw on vocabulary about neo-colonial power structures and their intersections, while others were newer to these concepts and were describing power relations as they spoke. Many expressed concerns regarding the received view of objectivity in research and neutrality in curricula. In the process, they were reaching for a new commonality, something not offered as a theoretical ideal but based on the physical bodies and material histories of people and nations. The idea that education needed to include these histories to be relevant to them as students and to their understanding of the world was strongly present.

INTERSECTION OF MARGINALISATION PERPETUATED BY LACK OF TEACHING OF COLONIAL HISTORIES

One of our opening questions was "Do you feel represented in the classroom?" Here, we made clear that representation did not have to be only in terms of race or language but could include gender, sexuality, ability, and citizenship status, among other axes of identifications. Often the word "representation" felt too formal and, collectively, we refined the question as "do you feel that the syllabus and the coursework include you?"

Almost all the students who were born and raised in Iceland, as well as many of the white, European students affirmed that their own subject positions were well represented in terms of race and culture, even sexuality, gender, and ability, but followed this with a caveat about their own awareness of their positionality. One student responded with "maybe too well [represented]" as another agreed and added "says woman born in Iceland, raised in Iceland, who speaks Icelandic." Students repeatedly mentioned that an acknowledgment of gender identities was embedded in the classroom, but that women and LGBTQI+ positionality recognition were mostly limited to whiteness, a pattern that is in line with Icaza and Vazques's (2018) study of education in the Netherlands.

Students described how the lack of acknowledgment of colonialism – let alone decolonial initiatives – reinforced whiteness as a universal norm (Dankertsen & Kristiansen, 2021). One student, quoting an article, called this the "pale, male, and stale" approach. Discussing her syllabi, she admitted being so accustomed to linking knowledge with European/North American male perspectives that "when you see a name on the syllabus you automatically think of a white," with another student finishing, "man." Some pointed to specific exclusions tied to their ethnicities or countries of origin. They felt this could even shape research by non-Icelandic students under supervisors whose expertise was mainly Nordic/European. One student shared how she had to abandon a project on her home country because her instructor lacked the necessary context and advised, given how different her home country was from Iceland, that she should do her research on Iceland. She reflected: "I also want to do something probably for my country, for my home city... So, I have to give up that idea. I can't. I can't do that. So, I feel like I didn't see my identity. When I was doing the project, yeah." On the other hand, when areas outside the Euro-Nordic are included in curricula or class discussions, the perspectives offered had caused a source of dismay to some students who may be from the region under discussion. One student longed for a more nuanced view of her home country:

> "I would say that the curriculum could benefit from like the idea of decolonisation, because various Icelanders think of my country, they think of stereotypes, but in fact we have more than 200 nations living there, and they all have at least their own – not accent, more like a dialect, different culture, different dishes."

Curricular marginalisation such as this one, and consequent pedagogical discrimination were often felt and/or voiced in varying levels of frustration on the part of students, both with the enforced liminality in the classroom and the limitations placed on their work and educational possibilities.

WHERE DO WE FIND OURSELVES? HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

When discussing the lack of teaching about colonial histories and their sense of what decolonial labour might mean in a university setting, many students navigated the conversation towards the role of the university in connecting students to a sense of a "global" perspective. There was a repeated sentiment of the need for the university to exemplify respect for global histories and knowledge. In this context the term "global" became a response to the overrepresentation of European history and perspectives. For some students, decoloniality and education was not necessarily tethered to critique or analysis but to an openness, a positive approach, to the idea of a "global perspective":

> "Yeah, I think that if you consider it from the global perspective, if you want to be part of the globalisation, you need to know about others as well. You don't need to be self-centred. So, I think maybe, yeah, global citizenship education would be possible."

Discussants across ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and ability circled back to this idea articulated by the student above, saying that an understanding of the complex histories of discrimination and collaboration was essential to their sense of themselves and their place in a globalised world. For others, the turn from colonialism to a globalised world seemed to be propelled not so much by a misplaced sense of guilt but by the need to understand the ways in which the present turbulent state of the world might be explicable. Even as one student acknowledged that they were not sure "how colonisation works globally in a specific country," they added "I feel like it will help our understanding of the world." We saw a kind of poignant urgency to make sense of an increasingly chaotic world and the conviction that a good education should be able to prepare students for living in and making sense of that world. Some students had previous experiences at other universities which contributed to their sense of there being a lack of discussion of colonialism at the University of Iceland, while others mentioned social media as a reference point for where they could access information regarding colonialism and its impact on education, an insight that was not present in the classroom. As one student said: "we all exist in this colonised world, and we are affected by it in many and different ways, not acknowledging structural racism creates chaos." The recognition of history as a present force that impacts everybody's life in diverse ways leads also to a sense of positive engagement with the world around/outside the university, prompting a sense of purpose produced by an actionable education. There is a real recognition of the need to construct a reliable narrative for "how we got here" in terms of having access to a global history that includes the centuries of colonisation and is not relegated simply to the past but connected in meaningful ways to the present (Svendsen, 2020).

We asked if they thought policy change was important, and if so, what recommendations they had for the university, and some students were quite clear about the changes they would like to see. Suggestions offered were both at the micro and macro levels; from incorporating colonial histories into curricula as a matter of implicit inclusion – in the same way that gender, sexuality, and abilities are included – to the more explicit "because of course, every depart-

ment [should introduce the topic or have material on colonisation]" as one student in Anthropology put it "in every class, every year". Such a fundamental re-ordering was seen, in many ways, as part of actual practices of equality and equity – ideals that hung in the balance. Even within the framework of a certain degree of equality among students at the University of Iceland, actual equity could only be brought about by simple yet specific measures. One student, however, pointed out a foundational barrier:

> "[One] way [to work against colonial legacies in academia] is probably to give more funds to those researchers or students from, like, immigrant communities. As far as I know, every year the university gives a certain amount of grants to researchers or to students, but more than half of them are Icelandic."

Even while all academics in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education lamented the paucity of funds and the consequent competitiveness of whatever grants are available, the fact that little sponsorship was available to non-Icelandic scholars is a clear and powerful endorsement of the need for decolonial work within spaces of higher education in Iceland.

CONCLUSION: MANDATORY EDUCATION ON COLONIAL LEGACIES FOR ALL DISCIPLINES

This study is part of a project archiving student experiences of how colonial histories and legacies are taught at the University of Iceland. Through an online survey that was followed up by focus group discussions, we documented students' accounts of how European colonisation was addressed in their fields. Students often linked the presence or absence of teaching about colonialism to teachers' desire and ability, or the lack thereof, of introducing and conducting related readings, discussions, and studies. Our findings show some students were acutely aware of this lacuna, especially in introductory and methodology courses, and some felt it important that we convey their frustrations to university authorities to prompt policy change. Across all three schools and various departments, students identified a lack in their academic training on the implications of colonialism for the history of science and the European university's ties to colonial practices. They described this gap as tangible, with some noting that it was treated as an elephant in the room during class.

As collaborators and co-participants in this project, students from the Schools of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences shared their insights, classroom experiences, and visions for what higher education could be. A key takeaway from these discussions is the need to critically examine the university as a producer and disseminator of knowledge. A crucial practical and policy recommendation is that educators and students work together to create interdisciplinary spaces where all can learn about the Euro-Nordic university's foundations and how its history is embedded in colonialism. Continual training in this knowledge is urgently needed amid rapid AI development, growing inequality, and persistent neo-colonial violence. Students increasingly argue they would better understand the world and their place in it through education that highlights the histories behind today's inequalities and injustices. As teachers, we also note the precarity of academic work and the importance of creating spaces for deep analysis of our teaching material, syllabi, and pedagogy. Everything depends on sustaining and learning with and from Indigenous, marginalised, and decolonial scholars from both the Nordic region and beyond. As one student put it, this is crucial labour "because it influences everything."

NOTES

Author Contributions Both authors collaborated on data collection, analysis, and manuscript.

Funding This research received funding from Rannís, the Icelandic center for Research.

Institutional Review Board Statement The study was approved by University of Iceland ethics committee.

Informed Consent Statement Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

[1] All data from focus groups and interviews is presented in a way that ensures participants' anonymity, in line with their informed consent. While the discipline or research area of participants is an important aspect of the data collected, we have had to state their background more broadly in cases where we considered such details a potential risk to their anonymity.

[2] The survey went out to undergraduate students but graduate and phd students heard about it and asked to participate. We had mixed groups with participants from various disciplines from the three schools, sessions were organised by participant availability.The difference in disciplines came up in conversation and was discussed. There were notable differences in terms of disciplines and schools - with some being much better equipped in terms of introducing colonialism and/or race, class, and gender as part of their curriculum.

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