

The PISA high performing systems for tomorrow framework: a decolonial reading of the OECD's future-oriented education for human flourishing

Journal of
International
Cooperation in
Education

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Received 10 June 2026

Revised 7 July 2026

Accepted 10 July 2026

Abstract

Purpose – This article critically examines the OECD's High Performing Systems for Tomorrow (HPST) initiative, focusing on how non-Western intellectual traditions – Ubuntu, Confucianism and Buddhism – are referenced in its conceptualisation of education for human flourishing. It investigates the depth of engagement with these traditions through a decolonial conceptual lens.

Design/methodology/approach – In this study, we employ qualitative content analysis of publicly available OECD documents and webinars. Our analysis is guided by and engages with decolonial scholarship, particularly Moosavi's (2020) proposals to prevent “decolonisation without decolonising”.

Findings – The findings show that, while the OECD gestures towards epistemic diversity, non-Western traditions are often superficially incorporated and subordinated to dominant Western frameworks. As the initiative moves from a preparatory phase to a more operationally oriented one, such references intermittently recede and later reappear, but without substantive development or influence on the underlying onto-epistemological framework. Instead, they are selectively incorporated into a pre-existing policy agenda structured by measurement, standardisation and global comparison, hence reinforcing existing epistemic hierarchies and marginalising non-Western perspectives.

Originality/value – This study offers a critical insight into the OECD's flourishing agenda, demonstrating that epistemic inclusion is enacted largely in rhetorical terms, without substantive engagement with non-Western traditions. It contributes to critical discussions on global education governance by exposing the persistence of Western-centric frameworks in shaping educational futures and by advancing the case for more meaningful forms of epistemic pluralism.

Keywords Global education governance, Future vision for education, Human flourishing, OECD, Decolonisation without decolonising, Non-Western intellectual traditions, Affective turn

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The OECD's Education for Human Flourishing – High Performing Systems for Tomorrow (HPST) initiative focuses on re-articulating the purposes of education in relation to future societal challenges. In January 2025, we, the two authors of this article, were attending Educa, Finland's leading education fair, where we joined the audience for the panel discussion

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Funding: The present study is a part of the EDUCA Flagship funded by the Research Council of Finland (#358924).

Disclosure statement: The authors report no competing interests.

The authors contributed equally to this work.



Journal of International Cooperation in
Education

Emerald Publishing Limited

e-ISSN: 2755-0303

p-ISSN: 2755-029X

DOI 10.1108/JICE-09-2025-0061

“Education for Human Flourishing – High Performing Systems for Tomorrow”. The panel was part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) wider initiative. It featured high-level policymakers and education leaders from Finland, Estonia, the OECD, the United States National Centre on Education and the Economy, and the International Baccalaureate programme. Given our shared scholarly interest in global education governance, we attended the panel discussion, which offered a rare opportunity to observe how the concept of “human flourishing” was articulated in relation to global educational futures, artificial intelligence (AI), foundational competencies and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Prior to the event, we had viewed the publicly available HPST webinar titled “Will AI in education help students live fulfilled lives?” ([EduSkills OECD, 2024](#)). In this webinar, the concept of education for human flourishing was framed through a pluralistic lens, drawing on non-Western philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu, Confucianism and Buddhism. These traditions were highlighted for their emphasis on relational ethics and intergenerational responsibility: “Drawing on Ubuntu, Confucianism and Buddhism, [the project] underlines the importance of caring for and about others. The planetary crisis extends these obligations. First, it emphasises our responsibilities towards other living species. Second, it prompts us to consider future lives” ([EduSkills OECD, 2024](#)).

However, during the panel discussion, the project lead, Michael Stevenson, introduced the HPST initiative, citing Aristotelian philosophy as its conceptual foundation. “We didn’t start by thinking how the world would be in the future, but went back in time to Aristotle”, Stevenson remarked. Notably absent was any mention of the non-Western traditions previously highlighted in the 2024 webinar. This discrepancy led us to ask: What became of Ubuntu, Confucianism and Buddhism in the HPST?

Motivated by this question, we set out to examine the extent to which these non-Western intellectual traditions are employed and engaged with in the HPST and how they are invoked in HPST’s publicly available policy documents to inform and justify future educational policy directions. This article critically examines the HPST and the OECD’s approach to human flourishing through a decolonial lens. We approach the HPST not only as an isolated OECD initiative, but as part of a wider pattern of global education governance in which future-oriented narratives function as key instruments for defining policy priorities, legitimacy and epistemic authority ([Robertson & Beech, 2023](#); [Robertson, 2022](#); [Sørensen, Ydesen, & Robertson, 2021](#); [Zagzebski, 2012](#)).

The article is structured as follows: we first review literature on current trends in global education governance, with particular attention to the OECD’s role in shaping global education agendas and the emergence of education for human flourishing, alongside decolonial theories that inform our analytical lens. We then outline our methodology and the qualitative content analysis of OECD policy documents and webinars. The findings trace how non-Western intellectual traditions are introduced, marginalised, and reconfigured across different phases of the HPST initiative. We conclude by discussing the implications of these dynamics for global education governance and for efforts to move towards more substantive forms of epistemic pluralism.

OECD as global power in education policymaking: affective turn and the emerging concept of human flourishing

Over the past three decades, education policy has been profoundly reshaped by the growing influence of intergovernmental organisations, with the OECD emerging as a central actor in global education governance. From a relatively marginal position in education, the OECD repositioned itself in the late 1990s through the global adoption of comparative methodologies and benchmarking tools, most notably PISA ([Addey, Sellar, Steiner-Khamsi, Lingard, & Verger, 2017](#); [Martens & Niemann, 2013](#); [Martens, 2007](#); [Ydesen & Grek, 2019](#)). This expansion of large-scale comparative assessment marked what [Martens \(2007\)](#) describes as a “comparative turn”, enabling the OECD to exert influence through international comparison.

Today, the OECD shapes education policy worldwide through extensive knowledge production in the form of statistics, evaluations and reports that appear scientifically robust and therefore difficult to contest (Martens, 2007; Ydesen & Grek, 2019). These outputs frequently serve as instruments of legitimisation for governments, which selectively mobilise PISA results to diagnose system weaknesses, justify reforms and construct policy narratives (Karseth, Sivesind, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2022; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2018; Waldow & Steiner-Khamsi, 2019). This practice is consistent with what Pawson (2006) terms “policy-based evidence”, whereby research is mobilised to support pre-existing agendas. More recently, scholarship has identified a shift within the OECD’s international assessments, as PISA has expanded beyond cognitive performance to include dimensions of students’ well-being and emotions, reflected in the OECD Learning Compass 2030 and in measures of student happiness (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). This shift has been described as an “affective turn” in OECD assessment practice (Rappleye, Komatsu, Uchida, Tsai, & Markus, 2024). We will discuss the OECD’s affective turn in more detail in the following section.

At the same time, intergovernmental organisations – including the OECD – have increasingly reframed their policies and strategies around future educational needs (Robertson & Beech, 2023; Sørensen *et al.*, 2021). These future-oriented interventions are presented as responses not only to perceived shortcomings in current education systems, but also to broader global conditions of permacrisis and polycrisis (Elfert & Balakrishnan, 2025). As Robertson (2022) argues, crises open up moments in which competing actors seek to reframe the present and claim authority over alternative futures, rendering the future itself governable and available as a political resource.

The OECD’s HPST initiative emerged directly through such crisis-inflected and future-oriented discourses, at a moment when the future purpose of education is increasingly debated. Launched in 2018 and grounded in the OECD’s Learning Compass 2030 framework, which promotes individual and collective well-being by incorporating social and emotional competencies, the HPST introduces three new competencies adaptive problem solving, ethical decision making and aesthetic perception – while explicitly addressing broader questions concerning education for human flourishing in the twenty-first century (OECD, 2025). These discussions in HPST are closely linked to future-oriented agendas, such as technological developments, particularly the rapid advancement of AI and its implications for work, citizenship and social life (Stevenson, 2022).

The project unfolded in two main phases. The first phase (2018–2021) focused on policy dialogue with senior civil servants in selected jurisdictions. The second phase, launched in 2022, expanded participation while placing a stronger emphasis on education for human flourishing (Stevenson, 2022, p. 2). The jurisdictions initially involved, according to the OECD’s website [1] Australia, British Columbia (Canada), Estonia, Finland, Germany, Singapore and the United Kingdom – were described as sharing “a commitment to exploring the next frontiers in education, for their own countries and the world” (Stevenson, 2022, p. 2) and are later characterised on the project website as “high-performing” systems whose students consistently achieve strong results irrespective of background (OECD, 2025) [2]. The latest update on the HPST project website relates to the HPST Helsinki Policy Dialogue, held in January 2025, which coincides in time with the Educa Fair panel we observed. At the time this study was conducted, it was unclear whether the project was still ongoing.

Developing a critical lens for the analysis of the HPST project

We now return to the discussion on the OECD’s affective turn, which provides an important backdrop to the launch of the OECD’s HPST project. Especially, critical discussions of this new mode of global education governance offer meaningful insights for our analysis of the initiative. The literature indicates that the affective turn manifested within the broader shift in the OECD’s assessment practices (e.g. Li & Auld, 2020; Rappleye *et al.*, 2024). Examining PISA for Development (PISA D), an OECD initiative aimed at making PISA more relevant

and accessible to low- and middle-income countries, as well as the above-mentioned Learning Compass 2030, [Li and Auld \(2020\)](#) argue that both initiatives should be understood as part of the OECD's long-term pattern of survival and expansion. In this view, both initiatives are designed to consolidate their global influence, particularly in education governance in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals ([Li & Auld, 2020](#)).

[Rappleye et al. \(2024\)](#) critique the persistent ideological universalism underlying OECD assessments, arguing that it remains evident even in the affective turn. Specifically, they contend that PISA 2018's measurement of students' feelings lacks cultural attunement and fails to be deeply aware of, or responsive to, alternative approaches to emotion, such as relational affect, which are eminently "real" for many people around the world.

To move beyond perfunctory engagements with alternative approaches to the global governance of education, we now examine how non-Western intellectual traditions have been mobilised in educational contexts and what insights these efforts offer. One example frequently discussed in the literature is Ubuntu, defined as a relational ontology and a humanistic ethic. In educational contexts, Ubuntu has been incorporated into higher education pedagogy to challenge Western individualism and hierarchical conceptions of knowledge and authority, particularly in teacher–student relationships (e.g. [Choane, 2025](#); [Simbi, 2025](#)).

Moreover, Rappleye, who has critically examined the OECD's affective turn, also presents several examples of educational approaches that are more closely engaged with onto-epistemic models derived from East Asian traditions across a range of his works. For instance, [Rappleye, Nishihira, and Takayama \(2026\)](#) introduce the potential of a Zen Buddhism-inspired model to move beyond what they describe as ignorance of "other forms of educational philosophy and practice", which they characterise as "a stance that blocks transformation and mutual learning across cultures and traditions in education" (p. 13). Central to their argument is the notion of *unlearning* one's own context in order to apprehend its peculiarities. In a similar vein, [Rappleye, Komatsu, and Nishiyama \(2025\)](#) examine Buddhism-informed Shokuiku (Lessons in Eating) as an entry point for unlearning taken-for-granted assumptions about education within Anglo-American contexts. Rather than advocating the transfer of Japan's Shokuiku policies and practices elsewhere, the authors conceptualise comparison as a methodological tool that is "more effective for inducing critical self-reflection; less effective as a prelude to importing policies or practices from elsewhere" (p. 143).

Importantly, researchers' ethnic, cultural and scholarly backgrounds do not, in themselves, guarantee serious attunement to alternative onto-epistemic foundations. Non-Western traditions are also frequently appropriated – particularly in applied educational research – as instrumental means to advance educational aims, without fundamentally questioning the assumptions of prevailing Western educational frameworks. For instance, Buddhist teachings have been used to develop tests of critical thinking ability ([Susongkoa, Yuenyongb, & Zainudinc, 2022](#)), which are framed as a key global educational priority. [Du and Li \(2024\)](#) likewise highlight the challenges of balancing traditional Confucian ideals with global demands, such as cultivating students' critical thinking skills and challenging established norms.

Across these cases, what distinguishes serious engagements with alternative approaches more explicitly is not the author's background, but rather their deep awareness of multiple ontologies and epistemologies in education, coupled with a willingness and commitment to recast what is taken as "good", "normal" or "universal" in dominant educational models. Such awareness and commitment require resisting the hegemonic power of Western positivist approaches that privilege scientific evidence for comparison and measurement in global education governance ([Saito, Edwards, Sustarsic, & Taira, 2023](#)), as well as forms of universalism that perpetuate the marginalisation of non-Western relational onto-epistemologies.

This paper conceptualises in-depth engagements, or forms of attunement, as decolonial approaches that seek to shift paradigms in the global governance of education through practices of unlearning and critical self-reflection, as highlighted in the literature discussed above (e.g. [Rappleye et al., 2025, 2026](#)). Such paradigm shifts also involve resistance to

dominant modes of global education governance, such as the unquestioned reliance on positivist approaches (e.g. [Saito et al., 2023](#)). Understanding decolonial approaches in the global governance of education as in-depth engagements coupled with resistance, the analysis examines whether traces of such orientations can be identified within the OECD's HPST project.

“Decolonisation without decolonising”: conceptual lens for the analysis of the HPST

To explore the HPST project and analyse how non-Western traditions are referenced throughout the initiative, this paper draws on decolonial literature, most notably Leon Moosavi's critique of the limitations of intellectual decolonisation in the social sciences. To develop a conceptual lens for critically examining the Western-centric epistemology embedded in the OECD's human flourishing agenda, this section primarily engages with [Moosavi's \(2020\)](#) work, alongside other scholars advocating substantively decolonial practices in research and society. These perspectives are adapted here to inform critical reflections on policymaking processes.

[Moosavi \(2020\)](#) observes that intellectual efforts to reframe curricula, pedagogies, classrooms and knowledge production through a decolonial lens – often by drawing on the Global South or non-Western traditions [\[3\]](#) – have become an increasingly prominent trend in the social sciences. While acknowledging the potential of this scholarly movement, he also raises concerns about the pitfalls of decolonial projects, particularly the enthusiasm surrounding an emerging and significant research agenda that may nevertheless discourage careful and self-reflexive interrogation of its own premises. To address these pitfalls, [Moosavi \(2020\)](#) outlines several scholarly agendas for seriously engaging Global South perspectives within decolonial scholarship. His proposals – most notably the call to engage with decolonial theory from the Global South to prevent “decolonisation without decolonising” ([Moosavi, 2020](#), p. 334) – are particularly useful for evaluating the decolonial gestures evident in the OECD's HPST initiative.

Moosavi further argues that, despite their valuable contributions, decolonial theories developed and articulated in the Global South are often ignored or only superficially engaged with in decolonial scholarship in the Global North. He warns that intellectual decolonisation may at times be treated as a fashionable way to “entertain oneself or as new seasoning to spice up one's life” (p. 344; see also hooks, [1992/2009](#), pp. 366–367). [Moosavi \(2020\)](#) criticises the tendency to use epistemic resources developed in the societies of the Global South merely as “a source of innovative knowledge production” (p. 343) for Northern decolonial scholarship, framing this practice as a form of *theory looting*. He calls on scholars to reflect critically on whether Northern academics are, in the name of decolonial projects, effectively plagiarising ideas from the Global South without proper recognition – mirroring historical processes through which the Global North has deprived the Global South of its people, materials and resources. To counter this, [Moosavi \(2020\)](#) argues that restoring ownership of the intellectual decolonial project to Southern scholarship requires not only including Southern scholars but also placing them at the forefront of decolonial inquiry.

This critique leads to another concern highlighted by Moosavi: *essentialisation*. In this process, non-Western intellectual resources are exoticised and treated as if they possess an inherent, knowable and portable essence – one that can be extracted, packaged and consumed by external subjects. In a similar vein, [Quijano \(2007\)](#) problematises how the objectified “other” is not only categorised as different from the European paradigm of rational knowledge but also regarded as external to the knowing subject by its very nature – or even as part of “nature” itself ([Quijano, 2007](#), p. 173). Within this epistemic configuration, the subject is understood as “the production site of all knowledge” ([Quijano, 2007](#), p. 172), whereas the object is assigned a fundamentally different ontological status, imagined primarily as raw material to be drawn upon in the production of knowledge.

This critique resonates with wider discussions on the geopolitics of knowledge production in Comparative and International Education. Scholars in this field have long challenged the division of intellectual labour that positions Western (often English-speaking) academia as the primary site of theoretical and methodological innovation, while relegating non-Western scholarship to the role of empirical data providers (Silova, Millei, & Piattoeva, 2017; Takayama, Sriprakash, & Connell, 2017). Takayama (2019), for example, shows how the Rest (cf. the West) is frequently treated as a “data source” or “empirical other”, where theories are applied, revised or domesticated (p. 147), rather than as an “epistemic other” capable of producing original theoretical insights (p. 153).

Finally, Moosavi’s critique of *tokenistic decolonisation* offers another important lens for analysing the OECD’s HPST initiative. By tokenistic decolonisation, Moosavi (2020) refers to practices that reference Southern or non-Western intellectual traditions largely as “lip service” to critical voices, creating the appearance that underlying epistemic issues have been acknowledged and resolved. Because such engagement is primarily performative, tokenistic decolonisation tends to remain a minimalist approach, characterised by the “fashionable” adaptation of Southern or non-Western intellectual resources and superficial practices of intellectual decolonisation. Moosavi (2020) therefore argues that decolonial projects must be “action-oriented in the pursuit of a decolonial agenda” (p. 350), emphasising that concrete practices – rather than abstract critique alone – distinguish superficial initiatives from genuinely committed ones.

Taken together, the decolonial concepts outlined above do not function as abstract critiques but as analytic lenses for interpreting specific patterns in the HPST material. In this analysis, *theory looting* helps to illuminate the reliance on a small number of Western-based scholars to mediate, translate and authoritatively speak about non-Western traditions, while excluding scholars rooted in those epistemic communities from shaping the project’s intellectual direction. *Essentialisation* offers a way of understanding how complex philosophical traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu are reduced to portable moral motifs – such as care for others or relational responsibility – that can be easily integrated into an otherwise Western policy architecture. Finally, *tokenistic decolonisation* provides a lens for examining the selective and symbolic inclusion of non-Western traditions in conceptual framing, without corresponding influence on the agenda. These concepts guide the reading of the HPST documents by directing attention to how non-Western traditions are rendered visible, where their influence terminates, and how epistemic authority is ultimately distributed across the policy process.

We now turn in the following sections to examine the HPST initiative’s argumentation and practices through the critical lens outlined above. The first “wing” or component of this lens draws on discussions of more attuned approaches to non-Western traditions in education (e.g. the notion of unlearning), while the second draws on critical discussions of the limitations of intellectual decolonisation in the social sciences. Before presenting our findings and analysis based on a decolonial reading, we briefly introduce the data and methods that underpin this research project.

Data and methods of analysis

The data for this study consist of publicly available documents from the OECD’s *High Performing Systems for Tomorrow* (HPST) website. As the study centres specifically on how the three non-Western traditions mobilised by the OECD to support its human flourishing agenda in this initiative are taken up in the synthesising policy document and its background materials, other OECD publications (such as Learning Compass, 2030) were excluded from the data corpus. However, connections to other OECD initiatives were considered when explicitly referenced in the HPST documents.

The data corpus included the most recent synthesis of the HPST project, *Education for Human Flourishing: A Conceptual Framework*, a technical paper published by the OECD in

2025, and six background papers that informed the synthesis (see the “Recorded webinars” after the list of references for full references to these documents). The 2025 technical paper and the six related papers formed the core data for the study. The documents analysed, listed in chronological order from the most recent onward, were:

- (1) [Stevenson \(2022\)](#). *Education for human flourishing*.
- (2) [Kristjánsson \(2023\)](#). *The new flourishing agenda in education: A report on the current theoretical state of play*.
- (3) [OECD \(2023\)](#). *High performing systems for tomorrow: 2023 conceptual framework*.
- (4) [Hinton, Hill, and Yemisci \(2024\)](#). *Evidence-based interventions and initiatives to support student well-being in schools*.
- (5) [VanderWeele and Hinton \(2024\)](#). *Metrics for education for flourishing: A framework*.
- (6) [OECD \(2024\)](#). *Results of initial High Performing Systems for Tomorrow stakeholders’ consultation report*.
- (7) [OECD \(2025\)](#). *Education for human flourishing: A conceptual framework*.

In addition to these documents, the analysis drew on two webinars related to human flourishing – “Non-Western Approaches to Flourishing, and Their Educational Implications” ([Jubilee Centre, 2022](#)) and “Webinar: Education for Human Flourishing” ([EduSkills OECD, 2025](#)). These sources were used to deepen our insight into the context in which the analysed documents were produced.

The analysis was conducted in several phases and can best be described as a concept-driven, qualitative content analysis, characterised by non-linear, cyclical movement between theory and data. In this approach, we followed [Jackson and Mazzei’s \(2012\)](#) “thinking with theory” framework, which involves reading the data in relation to the theoretical concepts guiding the analysis and moving back and forth between these concepts and empirical data. Following their approach, we applied theory not simply as explanatory but as productive, using a decolonial lens to create new ways of thinking about the data corpus rather than simply organising or interpreting it.

Rather than engaging in rigid deductive or inductive coding, we first identified all parts of the documents in which the three non-Western traditions were explicitly discussed. We then re-read these excerpts through the specified analytical lens and refined them through engagement with the data. In each phase, the two authors first agreed on an analytical protocol, then conducted individual readings, and finally jointly discussed and consolidated their observations. In the first phase, both authors independently read all documents and viewed the webinars, making notes of their preliminary impressions. These were subsequently discussed and synthesised in a joint session. In the second phase, we again read all documents and viewed the webinars, this time focusing specifically on how Ubuntu, Buddhism and Confucianism were presented, addressed and utilised. During this phase, we systematically collected all data excerpts that directly mentioned these traditions or referred to other non-Western philosophies or traditions. These excerpts were then compiled into a common file.

Next, we independently analysed the consolidated file, referring to previous critical scholarship on the affective turn in global education governance (e.g. [Rappleye et al., 2024](#)) as well as decolonial literature (e.g. [Moosavi, 2020](#); [Quijano, 2007](#)). In this process, we examined how references to non-Western traditions varied throughout documents, including their frequency, depth of engagement and positioning within each document and in each phase of the policy process, as reflected in the documents’ chronological order. Through repeated back-and-forth engagement with both the literature and the documents (cf. [Jackson & Mazzei, 2012](#)), we identified recurring patterns in how these traditions were introduced, taken up and subsequently marginalised, which informed the thematic structuring of our findings.

Simultaneously, we identified key concepts from the literature discussed earlier and used them as theoretical lenses through which to interpret these empirical findings. In the final phase of the analysis, we read the document corpus holistically to develop a fuller understanding of how the three traditions were positioned in relation to other forms of knowledge mobilised in the texts.

Throughout the study, we also engage in reflexivity by narrating the discomfort – including hesitation and self-doubt (Takayama & Okitsu, 2025) – we experienced while conducting our critical analysis using concepts derived from decolonial literature. The reflexive account explicitly acknowledges the limitations of the study and concretised the difficulties involved in processes of delinking (Mignolo, 2007; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012) from the layers of modernity/coloniality (see also the editorial of this issue).

Moosavi (2020, p. 333) stresses that serious engagement in decolonial projects requires heightened reflexivity regarding scholars' own intellectual outputs. In response, this article explicitly engages in reflexivity – or, drawing on Pillow (2010, p. 274), “an ongoing self-awareness during the research process”, and, on Jamieson, Govaart, and Pownall (2023, p. 2), “the process of engaging in self-reflection”, regarding how researchers' positionalities, biases and worldviews shape their work. In resisting participation in what Moosavi (2020) describes as the “decolonial bandwagon”, we reflect critically on the kinds of knowledge produced in this article, the purposes it serves, and who ultimately benefits from it. By engaging in what Pillow (2003) terms uncomfortable reflexivity, including explicit acknowledgement of our hesitations and self-doubts in conducting a critical study that draws on decolonial scholarship while remaining situated within European academic traditions, we foreground the struggles and difficulties inherent in decolonial research practice.

This reflexive stance also shaped how we read the HPST materials, reminding us to remain attentive to our own interpretive position as researchers working within Western academic institutions. This entailed resisting the impulse to resolve interpretive ambiguities or to derive intentions beyond what the documents themselves made visible. Reflexivity thus informed not only how we wrote about the HPST, but also how we identified absence, silence and marginalisation as empirical phenomena. In this sense, reflexivity functioned as an analytical practice that foregrounded the limits of our own epistemic authority when engaging with a project that claimed global relevance for the very purpose of education.

Empirical findings

This section presents the results of our analysis of the dataset introduced above. The data corpus spans from the initial report, *Education for Human Flourishing* (Stevenson, 2022), to the final synthesis report, *Education for Human Flourishing: A Conceptual Framework* (OECD, 2025). Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu are mobilised across the HPST materials. However, our study shows a persistent and cumulative marginalisation of non-Western knowledge traditions, which remain peripheral to the HPST project's development despite their recurrent mention. When non-Western traditions are included, they primarily function symbolically or illustratively and do not substantively shape the conceptual or policy development of the HPST framework. Across the document sequence, four recurring empirical patterns are visible: (1) the superficial and externally initiated inclusion of non-Western traditions; (2) brief descriptions of non-Western traditions without in-depth engagement; (3) the progressive displacement of non-Western approaches as the project proceeded to developing metrics and indicators. The results are organised around these patterns.

The superficial and externally initiated inclusion of non-Western traditions

The first pattern – the externally initiated and superficial inclusion of non-Western intellectual traditions – appears early in the project's lifespan. The initial document, *Education for Human*

Flourishing (Stevenson, 2022), outlines the HPST's ambition to reconceptualise the purpose of education globally in response to emerging challenges, particularly those posed by AI. According to Stevenson (2022, p. 2), the initiative seeks to establish "a robust conceptual framework that informs policy development in secondary education for interested countries and steers the long-term direction of PISA". Notably, this report makes no mention of non-Western intellectual traditions, and its development involved only a limited number of participating countries described as jurisdictions exploring the future of education nationally and globally (Stevenson, 2022, p. 2).

In the same report, Kristjánsson is introduced as "a leading authority on Aristotle" (Stevenson, 2022, p. 4), and Aristotelian philosophy is the sole philosophical reference at this early stage of the HPST project. Shortly thereafter, Kristjánsson introduced "Non-Western Approaches to Flourishing" in a Jubilee Centre webinar (November 2022), followed by publication of the OECD-commissioned report *The New Flourishing Agenda in Education* (Kristjánsson, 2023). Within the HPST initiative, this report is the only document to engage substantively with non-Western intellectual traditions, namely Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu, as alternative intellectual resources that may enrich the conceptualisation of human flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2023, pp. 19–21).

Although Kristjánsson (2023, p. 6) calls for synthesis by adding "the three non-Western approaches ... to give a more multiculturally balanced view", engagement with these traditions remains limited. While the report acknowledges cultural nuance and the need to adapt the concept of flourishing to diverse contexts, it emphasises the need to define a single, coherent ideal of flourishing as an educational aim (Kristjánsson, 2023, p. 9). The non-Western traditions are introduced relatively early in the report but are not sustained throughout the analysis; instead, selected features – such as relationality and moral emphasis – are abstracted from them and incorporated into a broader synthesis that remains predominantly grounded in neo-Aristotelian and Western conceptual framework.

The first version of the conceptual framework (*Education for Human Flourishing: A Conceptual Framework*, OECD, 2023) introduces three competencies to complement those assessed in PISA: adaptive problem-solving, ethical decision-making and aesthetic perception. Adaptive problem-solving is closely linked to innovation and entrepreneurship, while ethical decision-making is framed in relation to the social value and economic impact of products and services (OECD, 2023, p. 8). In this document, Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu appear briefly alongside Aristotelian philosophy and positive psychology, confined to a half-page subsection ("3.3 What We Owe Others," OECD, 2023, pp. 7–8) largely drawn from Kristjánsson's (2023) commissioned report. Here, non-Western traditions are referenced primarily to emphasise care for others and relational responsibility, while Aristotelian conceptions of flourishing receive substantially greater attention.

Brief description of non-Western traditions without in-depth engagement

The two OECD documents that elaborate the conceptual framework for education for human flourishing (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2025) exemplify the second pattern: a brief description of non-Western traditions, without in-depth engagement through practices of (un)learning and critical self-reflection. In the renewed conceptual framework (OECD, 2025), sections addressing non-Western traditions rely heavily on formulations reproduced from earlier documents, particularly Kristjánsson (2023), with minimal substantive elaboration.

The only notable addition beyond earlier Western-centred accounts is the introduction of the Daoist philosophy of *wuwei*. In the renewed framework (OECD, 2025), *wuwei* is mobilised to suggest that flourishing unfolds over the course of a lifetime, cannot be straightforwardly engineered, and therefore calls for caution against over-instrumentalisation of schooling. While this concept appears in discussions of responsibilities towards others, the report does not engage directly with Daoist philosophy. Instead, *wuwei* appears within a broader Confucian discussion of moral cultivation, non-coercive action, restraint and gradual development. In this

context, the concept functions as a qualifying element within an otherwise Confucian account rather than as a distinct philosophical contribution in its own right. Across the relevant sections (OECD, 2025, pp. 95–96), *wuwei* is briefly introduced but neither developed nor theorised in depth, nor engaged with as a distinct onto-epistemological tradition. Rather, as observed in the OECD's treatment of Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu, it is incorporated as a portable ethical motif, selectively assimilated into an existing future-oriented framework, thereby foreclosing possibilities for unlearning or genuine cultural attunement.

Taken together, this pattern indicates that, while selected non-Western concepts are incorporated into the conceptual framework, engagement remains limited to carefully delimited elements integrated into existing framings. The first two patterns thus demonstrate that the HPST encounters with non-Western traditions occur without sustained or in-depth engagement with alternative epistemological approaches.

The progressive displacement of non-Western approaches

The two reports presenting the conceptual frameworks developed under the HPST initiative (OECD, 2023, 2025) also illustrate a third pattern: the inclusion of non-Western traditions without corresponding agenda-setting effects. Across subsequent HPST documents, this is followed by the gradual displacement of these approaches as the initiative turns towards operationalisation through metrics and stakeholder perspectives (Hinton *et al.*, 2024; VanderWeele & Hinton, 2024; OECD, 2024). While both versions of the framework reference broader educational purposes, engagement with Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu remains confined to the conceptual level as the project proceeds toward stakeholder consultation and subsequent policy phases.

In early 2023, the OECD conducted stakeholder consultations across six jurisdictions, reported in the *Results of Initial High Performing Systems for Tomorrow Stakeholders' Consultation Report* (OECD, 2024). The consultation aimed to gather perspectives on human flourishing and its implications for education. However, the three non-Western traditions explicitly referenced in earlier HPST documents – Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu – are entirely absent from the consultation report. Aristotelian virtue ethics is likewise not referenced.

As the HPST initiative advances beyond conceptual framing, non-Western traditions become progressively displaced in documents focused on operationalisation. Two reports are particularly central at this stage: *Evidence-Based Interventions and Initiatives to Support Student Well-Being in Schools* (Hinton *et al.*, 2024) and *Metrics for Flourishing* (VanderWeele & Hinton, 2024). The interventions report outlines a range of “evidence-based interventions and initiatives” aimed at enhancing student well-being, particularly in response to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws on studies from a range of national contexts, including Turkey, Hong Kong, Israel and the Philippines, and frequently asserts that interventions have proven effective “across ages and cultures” (Hinton *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). Despite these claims of cross-cultural applicability, the report does not engage with specific cultural, philosophical or intellectual traditions from non-Western societies.

Notably, Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu do not appear in this document. References to multicultural contexts appear briefly – for example, in discussions of meaning and purpose – but remain limited in scope. The analytical frameworks employed throughout the report primarily draw on Western psychological and educational paradigms, such as positive psychology, social-emotional learning and character education (Hinton *et al.*, 2024). These approaches appear grounded in an implicit ontology of the individual as a bounded, self-developing subject, whose well-being is defined by the cultivation of internal capacities (e.g. self-efficacy, emotional regulation and resilience), with relationships primarily framed as external supports for individual flourishing. This contrasts with relational onto-epistemological traditions, such as Ubuntu, in which personhood is constituted through social relations rather than antecedent to them (e.g. Choane, 2025; Simbi, 2025).

The subsequent report, *Metrics for Flourishing* (VanderWeele & Hinton, 2024), focuses on developing a conceptual foundation for measuring human flourishing. While the authors emphasise flexibility, contextualisation and adaptability in metric development (VanderWeele & Hinton, 2024, p. 9), the report does not reference non-Western traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism or Ubuntu, nor does it meaningfully engage with Aristotelian virtue ethics beyond a brief citation in the references. At this stage of the HPST initiative, non-Western traditions and epistemologies disappear entirely from the project's operational frameworks.

The OECD as a multivocal actor: internal tensions and openings for alternative future narratives

It is important to acknowledge that the OECD, or more precisely, groups of scholars and practitioners working within it, appear to be making a genuine effort to move towards alternatives to the prevailing measurement culture by reworking and operationalising the concept of human flourishing. These internal tensions are evident in discussions during the OECD webinar on *Education for Human Flourishing* (EduSkills OECD, 2025). In this webinar, the leader of the HPST project, Michael Stevenson, responded to a question from the audience – “How do you measure all of this [new competences of flourishing]?” – by acknowledging that “we’ve rushed too quickly into how do we measure”, and have focused on comparing learning outcomes across students, classes and countries (40:00–40:12). He continued:

This is the moment, really, to pause and think profoundly about the purposes [of education] that we’ll need for the 21st century. That said, no one’s going to run away from the measurement issue, and I think that some of the schools are already thinking about these, looking at different pieces that they’ve got to play with (40:10–40:35).

Similarly, Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills at the OECD, reflected on the tensions surrounding assessment practices, stating:

We need a different assessment culture as well to observe those human flourishing concepts, and it’s always the issue. In the end, what we measure is where we will place our attention. And where our attention is, we will see action, and in that sense, I think building a new kind of assessment culture is very important (45:35–45:58).

Taken together, these statements point to the multivocality within the OECD as it seeks to reorient its future-oriented work while remaining anchored in long-standing evaluative practices. At the same time, the empirical trajectory analysed in this study shows that non-Western traditions enter the HPST initiative only after the commissioned report by Kristjánsson (2023), remain marginal thereafter, and are progressively sidelined as the project moves toward stakeholder consultation, intervention design and measurement. Rather than deepening over time, engagement with these traditions stabilises at a symbolic level, marked by repeated reliance on a single commissioned source. As the initiative advances, epistemic pluralism gives way to consolidation around Western policy, psychological and measurement paradigms. These patterns remain consistent across documents, genres and stakeholder engagement moments.

Discussion and interpretation

Taken together, our findings demonstrate that the OECD’s human flourishing agenda is shaped by the superficial inclusion and marginalisation of non-Western philosophical traditions, alongside the continued dominance of metric-based logics and Western epistemologies in policy design. At early stages, non-Western traditions are essentialised (see Moosavi, 2020) and invoked as sources of ethical inspiration and moral vocabulary, lending legitimacy to a broadened vision of educational purpose. As Moosavi (2020) argues, such gestures animate discourse without challenging – or resisting – its foundational Western orientation.

In relation to in-depth engagement with or cultural attunement to other ways of knowing (Rappleye *et al.*, 2024), some HPST documents attempt to incorporate non-Western traditions, presenting human flourishing as a culturally balanced concept and responding, at least rhetorically, to related scholarly critiques non-Western traditions are mobilised in ways that resemble what Moosavi (2020) terms *tokenism*, rather than constituting genuine attempts to move beyond the hegemony of Western epistemology (Silova *et al.*, 2017; Takayama *et al.*, 2017). As a result, the flourishing agenda remains entangled with human capital logics and Western epistemic dominance, rendering its redefinition of educational purpose more cosmetic than transformative.

Importantly, the marginalisation of non-Western traditions in the HPST does not occur as a single moment of exclusion but unfolds gradually and processually as the initiative moves from conceptual exploration to operational decision-making. As the project advances, however, this plurality is progressively narrowed: first through reliance on commissioned expertise, then through stakeholder consultations oriented towards existing policy frames, and finally through the development of interventions and metrics. What begins as an apparent openness to multiple ways of knowing is thus transformed into *theory looting* (Moosavi, 2020), in which non-Western traditions are permitted to inform narrative framing but excluded from shaping the evidentiary and instrumental core of the policy process. This sequencing is central to understanding how inclusion operates not as a redistribution of epistemic authority, but as a governance strategy that stabilises existing hierarchies as futures become governable. While these stages are presented as culturally sensitive and globally applicable, they rely on claims of cross-cultural effectiveness without engaging with the philosophical or epistemic foundations of non-Western traditions.

At first glance, the *Education for Human Flourishing* initiative appears to mark a rhetorical expansion of the OECD's educational agenda by foregrounding well-being, mutual care and ethical responsibility. This shift represents a welcome departure from the organisation's longstanding emphasis on education as an instrument of economic growth and human capital development. However, closer analysis suggests that the HPST initiative remains firmly embedded in the prevailing assessment paradigm. Western-centric, competence- and metric-based frameworks continue to structure how educational purpose is conceptualised, rendered visible and governed (Addey *et al.*, 2017; Ydesen & Grek, 2019), while non-Western approaches are appropriated in ways that merely "spice up" the framework (Moosavi, 2020). In practice, the HPST largely continues along a trajectory shaped by positivist approaches to global education governance (Saito *et al.*, 2023), relying on assessment- and metric-based frameworks that constitute the cornerstone of the OECD's global position. The future direction of this work – anchored in the much-criticised logic of metrics (Gorur, 2016) and shaped by the affective turn in education policy (Rappleye *et al.*, 2024) – is clearly reflected in two reports commissioned by the OECD and produced in 2024 by neuro- and education scientists at Harvard University's Institute for Quantitative Social Sciences (Hinton *et al.*, 2024; VanderWeele & Hinton, 2024).

The OECD has long been noted for constructing authoritative spheres of "scientific" evidence that are difficult to contest (Martens, 2007). Although human flourishing is not a scientific fact, it operates in a comparable manner: framed as an unquestionably desirable goal, it resists critique through its normative appeal. As a result of the lack of in-depth engagement with alternative approaches to education governance (Rappleye *et al.*, 2024), coupled with the absence of resistance to the positivist mode of global education governance (Saito *et al.*, 2023), the HPST's ambitious attempt to integrate non-Western epistemologies becomes decontextualised and subsumed within the OECD's prevailing assessment framework. As flourishing becomes articulated through measurable constructs and indicators, earlier pluralistic references no longer figure as relevant sources of knowledge.

Our analysis revealed no evidence of the kind of unlearning that decolonial scholars identify as a prerequisite for epistemic transformation (Rappleye *et al.*, 2026). Although the HPST aspires to move beyond human capital theory, its newly articulated competencies do not

significantly depart from it; rather, they remain aligned with the logics of economic growth and quantitative regime-building. In this sense, the OECD continues to operate much as it has in the past: beginning from the perspectives of a small number of “high-performing” systems and translating selected ideas into measurable policy objectives.

At the same time, the OECD should not be understood as a monolithic actor. Both the HPST reports and associated webinars point to internal debates and competing visions within the organisation. These observations contribute to research on global education governance by showing that Western modernity is neither internally coherent nor uncontested but instead marked by tensions and emerging cracks. Document analysis alone cannot fully capture these dynamics, and further empirical work – such as expert interviews – is therefore required to explore the internal negotiations and institutional dynamics that shaped these texts.

Despite its limitations, our study builds on previous research on future-oriented narratives as new governing technologies in global education governance (Robertson & Beech, 2023; Sørensen *et al.*, 2021). Such narratives are not merely innocent visions but function as mechanisms that shape reform priorities and configure not only high-performing systems but also the governable futures of tomorrow. Even in an initiative such as the HPST that aims to cultivate human flourishing, futures are ultimately shaped through anticipatory standardisation in the form of metrics and competencies. The selective and superficial engagement with non-Western traditions thus leads to futures that may be plural in language but not diverse in epistemic authority.

Against this backdrop, while human flourishing as an educational aim holds considerable promise, our analysis suggests that framing it as a new global purpose requires far more than the selective inclusion of non-Western concepts within an otherwise Western-designed framework. In its current form, the OECD’s approach raises a critical question for global education governance: why does the organisation persist in developing universal frameworks that are subsequently “tailored” to diverse contexts, rather than beginning from a genuinely pluralistic epistemological foundation?

Engaging in reflexivity: reflecting on the limitations of the study

The critical gaze is not directed solely at the OECD’s HSPT project. As Moosavi (2020) argues, if we are to sincerely engage in intellectual decolonisation, this critical perspective must also be directed at our own decolonial thinking and doing. We therefore conclude the discussion with a self-reflective examination of our own decolonial doings. Our major concern was that this paper might, albeit unintentionally, take someone’s voice away by attempting to give it back to them (Spivak, 2010). Carrying a Western background and situating our onto-epistemic foundation within Westernised academic frameworks, we inevitably engage in the epistemic violence of taking the position of an all-knowing subject (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011) while criticising the HPST project from the secure position of a scholar, an epistemic authority.

Saija, who was raised in a (non-practising, yet culturally embedded) Western Christian family, has had the persistent feeling throughout the writing process that she is barely permitted to even enter the decolonial conversation. To Oshie, while Buddhism is an important component of her identity and ethnophilosophy, her understanding of Buddhism is, after all, a personal one (see Nishimura-Sahi, 2025). Her Asian background is not a “free pass” to speak for all the non-Western intellectual traditions. In order to resist falling into “decolonisation without decolonising”, we must engage in reflexivity by asking ourselves the questions Mignolo (2011) raised: What kinds of knowledge and understanding are we producing through such practices? Who benefits from, or is positioned to take advantage of, this knowledge and understanding?

Acutely aware of the limitations of our decolonial approach, we are writing this paper in a glimmer of hope that the knowledge and understanding we are producing through writing this piece, carrying feelings of discomfort and hesitation, contribute to delinking (Mignolo, 2007;

Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012) global education governance from the layers of modernity/coloniality (see the Editorial of this issue). The onto-epistemic foundation of the scholarly traditions to which we belong is multi-layered and intricately intertwined, as it is constituted of our diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Delinking, therefore, emerges as a sticky and messy project (Law, 2004) that cannot be accomplished swiftly or in any straightforward manner.

This is not to say, however, that a decolonial project should be abandoned due to its difficulty or messiness. Delinking may require time that can only be moved forward through the persistent and collective consciousness of alternative beings, knowings and doings, as well as the complexity and multi-layeredness of our own epistemic practices. Aware of critiques of reflexive engagement (Gani & Khan, 2024; Pillow, 2003), we have chosen to present this paper in a way that acknowledges its own positionality. We do so on the premise that creating further cracks in the structures of modernity requires engaging with “imperfect” decolonial projects – including, for example, the OECD’s HPST initiative as well as this paper, acknowledging its own limitations and imperfections – as part of an ongoing process of growth towards further delinking.

Conclusions

In this article, we examined the OECD’s High Performing Systems for Tomorrow – Education for Human Flourishing (HPST) as an instance of future-oriented global education governance through a decolonial lens. We focused on how Buddhism, Confucianism and Ubuntu are engaged with in the construction of education for tomorrow, and how technologies of inclusion and exclusion operate within such future-oriented framings of education for human flourishing. Our concern was not merely whether the OECD references non-Western traditions, but how these traditions are mobilised and with what consequences for who is authorised to participate in defining educational futures. Through a decolonial reading of the HPST policy documents and associated webinars, we analysed how these traditions circulate within a powerful, future-oriented governance apparatus and the depth at which non-Western epistemologies are taken up as meaningful policy resources. Although this study examines a relatively small corpus of documents and a single OECD initiative, it nevertheless reveals enduring patterns concerning who sets the future agenda in global education governance.

Our findings underscore that participation in shaping educational futures is not determined by whose traditions are cited, but by whose epistemologies are authorised to shape strategic content and future directions. Policies such as the HPST must therefore be understood not merely as texts, but as sites of power in which decisions about which futures are considered possible simultaneously delimit what is deemed desirable, attainable and worth preserving or transforming. Within the HPST, non-Western traditions are, in a sense, invited to speak, yet with no real epistemic authority or transformative power, and largely through the mediation of Western scholars. Their inclusion reveals a persistent asymmetry: while Western actors retain authority over imagining and governing the future, non-Western traditions are relegated to a decorative role, furnishing policy imaginaries with ethical motifs such as care for others or planetary responsibility. These forms of inclusion do not unsettle existing hierarchies; rather, they stabilise them under the banner of diversity and inclusion. At the same time, the HPST should not be understood as the product of a monolithic organisation. The initiative also revealed internal tensions and moments of hesitation – small cracks within which the possibility of alternative narratives and ways of thinking can be discerned.

Reflecting on these findings also confronts us as authors. As we experienced in writing this paper, resisting the decolonial bandwagon (Moosavi, 2020) is not easy, even when one remains open and reflexive about one’s own positionality, shaped by Western academic training. Writing within dominant scholarly conventions – particularly those governing academic voice, argumentation and claims to authorship – while critically interrogating the limits of one’s own epistemic authority entails persistent tension and uncertainty, including the

temptation to draw conclusions that appear only as faint or ambiguous traces in the data. Yet such hesitation and self-doubt are analytically productive: they signal the difficulty – and the worth – of translating a decolonial agenda into academic work and practice.

Ultimately, our analysis suggests that the central problem facing initiatives such as the HPST is not inclusion as such, but the failure to move beyond symbolic representation toward shared and equal epistemic authority. Defining which futures are considered possible, desirable and attainable should be understood as a collective endeavour extending across all stages of policy processes, as each stage constitutes a site of power through which policy imaginaries – such as human flourishing – actively configure futures. If intergovernmental organisations genuinely seek to construct educational futures in epistemically plural ways, inclusion must therefore involve a willingness to relinquish exclusive epistemic control. The critical question, then, is not whether the OECD is prepared to include a plurality of voices in its futures work, but whether it is willing to pursue a fundamentally inclusive epistemological paradigm in practice.

Ethical declaration

This research follows the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. No ethical evaluation was required.

AI use declaration

Language editing for this manuscript was assisted by AI-based tools. These tools were used exclusively for grammar corrections and language editing; all theoretical concepts and interpretations are the authors' own.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

Notes

1. Accessed to <<https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/pisa-high-performing-systems-for-tomorrow-hpst.html>> on 5th of June 2025.
2. The expanded set of jurisdictions mentioned in the [Stevenson \(2022\)](#) report, are not listed on the website or any of the documents analysed in this study.
3. [Moosavi \(2020\)](#), p. 345) employs the term “Global North/Global South” as an axis dividing the privileged and marginalised in academia, while also acknowledging that others use the term “West/non-West” instead. He also notes that neither axis is sufficient for capturing all forms of marginalisation and exclusion that manifest in academia (e.g. Japan may be regarded as non-Western yet still part of the Global North). In this paper, we primarily use the term “non-Western” for consistency with OECD documents, while occasionally employing the term “Global South” when referring to [Moosavi \(2020\)](#).

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Further reading

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