Finding a place for Kindness within higher education: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

A look at social media platforms and media headlines, confirms that public discourse feature matters pertaining to well-being, altruism, benevolence, compassion, and community health. In our complex and rapidly changing world, the importance of kindness in society has become increasingly evident. A surge of interest in kindness can be aligned to the 2019-2022 pandemic, during which the global community sought avenues to demonstrate kindness to others and themselves. Whilst the concept of kindness dates to the 13th century, it has increasingly permeated everyday conversations, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. Despite its popularity, kindness lacks a precise scholarly definition, leaving uncertainty about its impact on teaching, learning, and research in higher education contexts. This paper aims to explore this gap by (a) reviewing existing research on kindness in higher education and (b) proposing a research agenda to guide future investigations. A systematic literature review (SLR), guided by the frameworks of Fox and Diezmann (2007, 2017) and Fox and Smith (2023), was conducted to examine the presence of kindness in higher education research literature and identify any prevailing themes.

Introduction

In our increasingly complex and changing world, there is an overwhelming need for kindness in society. The swell of interest in kindness can be aligned with the pandemic of 2019-2022, when the global community sought ways to show kindness to others and themselves. Social media and press headlines promoted wellbeing, altruism, and community health. The common message across the different forums was aptly captured by Kath Koschel and her work through the Kindness Factory, where she states: "Kindness is the key to human connection ... despite the loneliness epidemic" (Koschel, 2023). Whilst the concept of kindness is currently trending, the definition of kindness can be dated back to the 13th century when the concepts of friendliness, deliberately doing good to others, and compassion were found in scriptures and songs.

Kindness is not a single entity but is conceptualised as the interplay of values, ways of thinking and actions encompassing overt behavioural and affective components. It has been proposed (e.g., Otake et al., 2006) that kindness has three main facets: considering the feelings of others; demonstrating acceptance, courtesy, and love towards others; and behaving honourably towards them; more commonly referred to as acts of kindness. Kindness has been recognised in popular contexts as planned and deliberate actions intended to benefit others. It has been more formally defined as "having or showing a friendly, generous, and considerate nature, and as encompassing gentleness, respect, amiability, and concern" (Johnstone, 2010). Similarly, Habibis et al. (2016) refer to kindness as 'an authentic and caring response to the call of the "Other"' (p. 400). While Curry et al. (2018) portray kindness as actions intended to benefit others, Erikson (2019) suggests that academic psychology tends to avoid the concept of kindness. According to Binfet (2015), the research that focusses on preventing unkind behaviour such as bullying is more proliferate in the literature than that which analyses the promotion of kind behaviour. This gap in the general academic literature aligns with the lack of a common definition of kindness in the psychological literature. Thus, when considering the place of kindness in the research literature pertaining to higher education, it comes up short.

The increasing current popular interest in the phenomenon of kindness can be associated with several contemporary developments. First, there has been the momentous rise of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), particularly in Australia, and its advocacy that kindness is fundamental to human nature. For example, kindness is one of the 24 character strengths listed within the virtue category of humanity in Peterson and Seligman's 2004 VIA Inventory of Strengths. Some of these include the proposition that kindness increases psychological flourishing; increases happiness and self-esteem; reduces social anxiety; increases self-esteem and optimism; heightens feelings of self-worth; and diminishes social anxiety (Carter, 2011; Hamilton, 2017; Layous et al., 2012; Passmore & Oates, 2022). Second, a wealth of converging scientific evidence, as outlined below, has shown that kindness has numerous benefits. Research evidence (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Exline et al., 2012; Rowland, 2018; Tashjian, 2018) overwhelmingly confirms that being kind and being a recipient of kindness positively influences a person's sense of well-being (Post, 2005). Finally, thoughts and actions that reflect the attributes of kindness contribute to building a more cohesive society due to the presence of increasing prosocial behaviours.

In the current political, economic, and environmental climate, the place of kindness in communities of all types is vital for enhancing positivity and feelings of hope (Rowland, 2018). Humans living in social groups prosper from positive behaviours through enacting various types of mutually beneficial cooperative interaction, including altruism and several different types of kindness (Curry et al., 2018). Though still an emerging area of empirical inquiry, kindness is gaining traction as a distinct research topic, having previously been included in studies of prosocial behaviour, altruism, and compassion (Algoe, 2019).

While kindness has become increasingly embedded in our everyday discourse, particularly through and post-pandemic, it lacks scholarly definition, and as such, it has had little impact on the emerging research set in the context of higher education. Higher education is complex yet is generally recognised as a sector of essential social and educational institutions influencing individuals, communities and society through the creation and dispersion of knowledge, as well as developing human capacities through learning. It is arguable that how knowledge is created, transmitted, and transformed, together with the presence of a respectful and inclusive learning environment in higher education institutions, can significantly influence students' and academics' experiences of kindness. Pressures on expectations, financial constraints experienced by students and the university, changing modes of learning, and technology have altered the university experience. However, recent years have seen an increase in pedagogies associated with kindness (Daniel, 2019) and compassion (Andrew et al., 2023) in higher education. Nonetheless, embedding kindness into higher education appears to have received less attention in the research literature (Rowland, 2018). Day and Robinson (2022) and Aspland and Fox (2022) concur that kindness in the curriculum is a topic seldom taught at the tertiary level. The purpose of this article is exploratory in nature, and it aims to (a) establish the scope of research evidence that underpins kindness in higher education and (b) establish the framing of a research agenda to guide further investigation.

Methodology

A systematic literature review (SLR) informed by the works of Fox and Diezmann (2007, 2017) and Fox and Smith (2023) was conducted to ascertain the existence of the concept of kindness in higher education and its prevalence in research literature. The SLR requires meticulous documentation of the procedures used to review the literature and to select appropriate papers (Pickering & Byrne, 2013). Therefore, a defined protocol was established identifying the steps conducted as outlined in Figure 1 below. The SLR research method consists of three phases: planning, execution, and reporting (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). The first two steps formed part of the methodology utilised for this project.
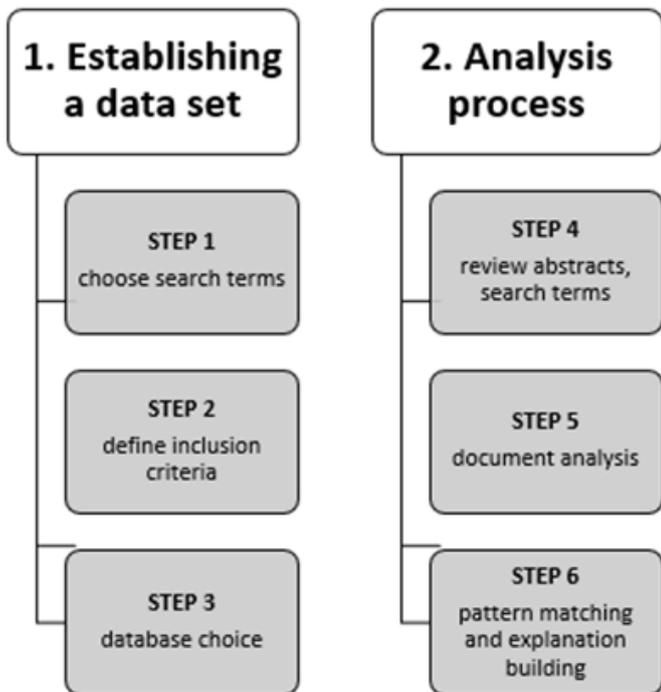
Figure 1. Methodology protocol steps.

Establishing a data set

At the outset, we acknowledge that there are threats to the validity of an SLR, including publication selection bias, inaccuracy in data extraction, and misclassification (Sjøberg et al., 2005). We also recognise that it is impossible to achieve complete coverage of everything written on a topic. However, to ensure a robust representation of the material, a university librarian supported the search with the determination of search terms, strings, database choices, and the creation of the initial dataset of articles for review. Having critiqued the process, three key steps were taken to establish the data set and these are outlined below.

Step 1: Choosing search terms

In consultation with a university librarian, we reviewed synonyms for the search for kindness in higher education and trialled terms. Given that our aim was to identify literature specifically pertaining to kindness, we chose to explore synonyms to ensure coverage of the higher education context.

A combination of search terms and fields created a range of ERIC on EBSCO database results ranging from 0 papers through to 100 papers, with a Google Scholar search identifying 509,000 papers relating to kindness in higher education in 0.12 seconds. After trialling a range of keywords, we settled on the search string AB kindness AND AB ('higher education' OR college OR university). This provided a suitable sample of papers to analyse for the purposes of this project.

Step 2: Define inclusion criteria

Articles in the database were limited to the 1992–2023 time frame. The search strategy covered only peer-reviewed journal articles because (a) they reflect the interests and values of mainstream research communities, and (b) credibility is determined through the peer-review process. At this stage, other publications, such as dissertations, conference proceedings, and editorial pieces, were excluded from the search.

Step 3: Choosing a database

The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database on EBSCOhost was the data source for this study. ERIC, which is sponsored by the USA Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, was used as it is a comprehensive, searchable, Internet-based bibliographic and full-text database of education research and information. The ERIC database contains content or 1,900,000 records with links to 590,000 full-text documents. A large range of abstracts representing the breadth of national and international education-related books, papers and articles was available through ERIC. Google Scholar, a commonly used web-based academic search engine, catalogues between 2 and 100 million records of both academic and grey literature. Whilst there is ongoing debate regarding the utility of Google Scholar as an academic resource (see Boeker et al., 2013; De Winter et al., 2014), it was used to supplement the library database search. Due to the extensive grey literature and following the recommendation from Haddaway et al. (2015), the search of articles focused only on the first 200 results.

After completing these three steps, applying the limiters of 1992-2022, ERIC database, peer-reviewed, the search strings AB kindness AND AB ('higher education' OR college OR university), and the Google Scholar search, 300 journal articles were discovered.

Analysis process

The data were analysed using the Framework Method of analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), which involved (a) familiarisation with the data, (b) identification of themes, (c) indexing or categorisation of themes, (d) charting of data in tabular or graphical formats, and (e) mapping and interpretation of data. These processes occurred throughout the abovementioned three steps.

The fourth step was to review the abstracts and key terms (e.g., kindness, higher education) of all 300 papers. The focus of this content analysis was to eliminate articles that did not represent the search goals. This manual check was conducted to ensure relevance. The closer examination reduced the data pool to 88 articles (59 papers from the ERIC database search and 29 papers from the Google Scholar search). An example of papers that were eliminated included papers that focussed on research set in the context of researching schooling but not higher education. Notably, some articles appeared more than once, and the word 'kind' was used to mean 'in the same way' rather than the human

act of kindness.

The fifth step was a document analysis (Rapley & Jenkings, 2010) with a focus on content analysis (Weber, 1990). A colour coding exercise highlighted key text and assisted in categorising and frequency of definitions.

The sixth step involved pattern matching and explanation building (Yin, 2009). The articles were reviewed to determine how kindness was embedded in higher education.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis of the data identified 13 themes. Most of the papers aligned with three key themes: (a) the *Kindness pedagogy theme*; (b) the subset group investigating *Kindness online pedagogies* (total of 30 papers); and (c) the theme encompassing student behaviours and traits (19 papers). There were 10 papers that investigated the presence of kindness across the university environment and 6 papers that focussed more deeply on the interplay of character traits and kindness in the higher education context. Academic leadership in relation to kindness advocacy in higher education providers was identified in 5 papers. The lens of gender when considering the concept of kindness in higher education was evident in just 5 papers, and the findings were not conclusive. Papers exploring curriculum, assessment, intrinsic motivation, service learning and faith-based themes are represented in a total of only 12 papers (see Figure 2 below). Thirteen themes in total were identified across the higher education literature, including the following listed from greatest to least common:

- Kindness pedagogy (20 papers identified)
- Kindness online pedagogy (10 papers identified)
- Kindness and gender (5 papers identified)
- Academic leadership and kindness in the higher education context (5 papers identified)
- Kindness and the university environment (10 papers identified)
- Kindness and strength of character in the context of higher education (6 papers identified)
- Student behaviour and kindness traits (19 papers identified)
- Kindness embedded in the higher education curriculum (1 paper identified)
- Assessment and kindness (2 papers identified)
- Intrinsic motivation and relatedness to kindness in the context of higher education (1 paper identified)
- Cultural dimensions of kindness (5 papers identified)

- Faith-based notions of kindness (2 papers identified)
- Service learning and Kindness (1 paper identified)

The prevalence of each theme within the search for this project is illustrated in Figure 2 below.
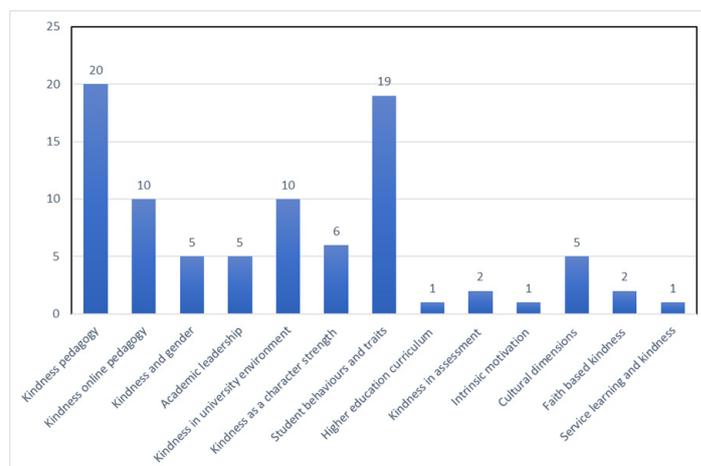

Figure 2. Kindness in higher education themes.

Insights to date

Based on the content analysis of the selected papers, a great deal of the research that investigated the concept of kindness in the context of higher education was aligned with the theme of pedagogy. This was inclusive of two categories. The theme *Kindness pedagogy* is inclusive of the generic pedagogy focus (20 papers) as well as those research papers that explore the presence of kindness in online pedagogy (10 papers), totalling 34.48% of the data set. In both the generic literature and that pertaining to online pedagogy, a pedagogy of kindness is not a new concept and has been reported in the literature in the pre-COVID context and throughout time. There has been a recognition across these papers that a pedagogy of kindness requires academics to recognise positionality, power, and identity and to approach teaching and learning through the lens of compassion and trust. In the context of higher education, pedagogy is central to the scholarship of learning and teaching (SoLT), both institutionally and professionally, for individual academics. As such, SoLT and professional practices that overtly incorporate the concept of kindness can be complex and unique to a particular context or teacher and fluid in their constructs. Such practices can be research-based and/or intuitive or experiential. It is well recognised in the higher education SoLT literature that the delivery of accredited curriculum across contexts, even within the same institution, can be very individualistic as it comprises both evidence-based pedagogical choices and relies on the academic's personal philosophies and pedagogical values.

This systematic literature review shows that the importance of elements of kindness embedded in academic pedagogy is gaining momentum as academics acknowledge the importance of connection with and care for students. This was particularly evident in the research that has been completed during and post-COVID, both nationally and

globally. The research, mainly small-scale studies, argues that kindness, care, compassion, and empathy are central to pedagogical engagement that benefits both learners and educators in their academic lives. This was strongly reported in the research writings that emerged throughout the pandemic as academics pivoted quickly to online learning environments applying pedagogies promoting human connection, care and compassion to improve student learning outcomes during times of crisis. These propositions have been researched and reported on predominantly since 2020. Whether this momentum will continue to grow in the post-pandemic years is yet to be seen through empirical literature.

The strong theme of *Student behaviours and traits* features research that investigates student behaviours displayed in their learning and during their engagements on campus. Nineteen papers (21.84% of the data set) explored student wellbeing, mental health, altruism, self-compassion, and self-kindness in the context of higher education, and how these traits positively correlated with student satisfaction and success. Aligning with this theme was also the finding that some academic disciplines required kindness, which was a critical component of the profession into which the students would likely graduate. For example, a paper written in 1970 identified expected capacities and characteristics of medical students, stating honesty, kindness, physical endurance, some degree of manual dexterity and preparedness to dedicate to the care of the patients were anticipated traits of students joining the medical profession (Ellis, 1970). In the current dataset, this was true of teaching and nursing professions.

While only 6.9% of the search findings or 6 papers were identified with a focus on *Character strength* within the higher education context, the work of Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman's research identified 24-character strengths (2014) connecting with the *Student behaviours and traits* theme. Peterson and Seligman's work has influenced corporations throughout Australia and the US and is prevalent in the restructuring of school pedagogies throughout Australia. While the influence of Peterson and Seligman is not as dominant in the higher education sector, it is likely that this framework will be reported more widely in future research. Within the index published by Peterson and Seligman (2014), the character strength of kindness is subsumed into the class of humanity that also includes love and social intelligence. Of importance here is that the 6 papers included in this theme investigate students' traits of kindness and how they correlate with the academic rigour of higher education courses, an important proposition. Similar research, including small-scale case studies, has been reported at the higher education symposia hosted by Kaplan Australia and New Zealand in 2022 and 2023. However, conference papers were not included in the initial search. A meta-analysis of small-scale studies of this type is a priority for further research.

Ten papers (11.49% of the dataset) identified in the systematic review process reported how a kind higher education environment positively influences student engagement on campus. This theme reflected a collection of papers that investigated how professional and academic staff actions in the operational space build trust, confidence, and a safe place to engage, and argued how such action is successful in reducing bullying and anti-social behaviours. One paper suggests that the priority for professional staff on campuses should be to provide guidance, service, and care for students with regularity, consistency, and efficiency (Yoder, 2019) and that in these workspaces, 'simple kindness' is necessary for both students and staff. Fiamengo (2013) argued that higher education providers should be places where students are given not only information, training, and legitimate support conducive to success with counselling services where needed, but also kindness in abundance. Interestingly, kindness was suggested to be gender specific, evidenced in 5 papers (5.75% of the data set) that proposed that there were gender differences in individuals' kind behaviours, implying that females exhibited kinder behaviours, thoughts, and actions than males. This proposition requires further analysis through more large-scale research, so it is not claimed as a generalisation here. Rather it is a tentative theme identified through the analysis of a small number of papers highlighted in this systematic review.

There were also 5 papers (5.75% of the data set) that explored the cultural nuances of kindness in the context of higher education. For example, one paper (Hsu et al., 2021) indicated that Chinese cultural values, such as knowledge, kindness, tolerance of others and harmony, were featured significantly in Chinese students' expectations in higher education. Another paper (Piper, 2016) investigated the role of 'Ubunti', an African philosophy of human kindness that can be utilised in supporting higher education students. The place of kindness in cross-cultural contexts within higher education is deemed a rich source of future evidenced-based inquiry.

Interestingly, only 5 (5.75% of the data set) papers were aligned with kindness and academic leadership in the context of higher education. These papers investigated how mentoring amongst academics can incorporate kindness and enhance acceptance and wellbeing among staff. For example, one paper (Erikson, 2019) affirms that kindness must be seen in a framework of values within higher education providers' mission statements and that it is central to communication that promotes academic partnerships with all stakeholders. There was only one paper within the 88 papers that addressed kindness at the organisational senior leadership and university culture level. Waddington (2018) suggests care, kindness, and compassion are not separate from being professional, but represent the fundamentals of humanity in the workplace; a workplace that requires kindness in leadership and the enhancement of compassionate institutional cultures. She argues that higher education providers, including universities, ought to be 'caregiving organisations' because of their role and primary task of helping students to learn.

Two further findings provided deeper insight into kindness in higher education. Firstly, most peer-reviewed articles in the data set have been published since the beginning of COVID-19 in 2019-2020. As the pandemic raged, people around the globe experienced long periods of isolation, psychological stress, and emotional exhaustion. Research

conducted since this period has identified that caring behaviours, random acts of kindness, compassion, and self-kindness have increased (Matos et al., 2023) due to the pain experienced by many throughout the pandemic. While this is important across the broader society, a similar finding cannot be evidenced for those working in higher education based on this SLR. As new publications are submitted from providers, from 2024 onwards, there may be new evidence to challenge the status quo. There is certainly a need to complete impact studies of this type if stronger conclusions are to be made regarding the correlation between kindness and positive higher education experiences for students and staff.

Across many sectors, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a surge in research on kindness. In the sector of higher education, while the pandemic required academics to pivot to online pedagogies and kindness featured significantly in these articles, a complimentary set of publications identified COVID as the motive for the study. Eighteen per cent of the papers (20 papers) identified during the content analysis noted that the research was completed at a time when higher education was experiencing pedagogical transitions implicit in the pandemic conditions. The review identified only two publications focussing on the concept of kindness in higher education from 1970 until 2007, a period of 37 years. In the following ten years until 2017, an increase to 28 articles appeared. However, in the four years from 2019 until 2023, 68 articles have been retrieved. Clearly, there is a strong correlation between the impact of the pandemic and the growing prevalence of the pedagogy of kindness in higher education. This is evident in Figure 3 below. Whether this will continue beyond 2023 is unknown at this point.
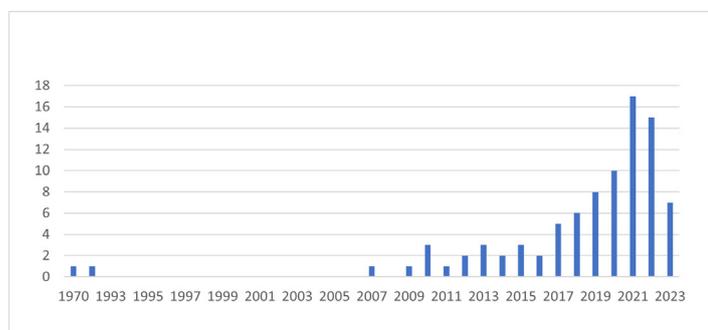

Figure 3. Year of published papers that formed the core of the systematic literature review.

This database suggests that, though still a nascent area of empirical inquiry, kindness is emerging as a distinct research topic, having previously been subsumed under the larger areas of study of prosocial behaviour, altruism, and compassion (Helliwell et al., 2022). While this is affirming for kindness advocates and influencers, one can conclude that there remains a dearth of research examining the coalescence of kindness and higher education (Binfet et al., 2022).

Secondly, the SLR revealed that 26% of research was conducted in the Health and Education disciplines, which is encouraging as most graduates will enter a caring profession. But for higher education across the board, there

is clearly more work that can be done. This call, however, is not new to the current audience. Twelve years ago, Rowland (2009) called for attention to kindness in the profession of teaching to include everything a teacher does to encourage, predict, and plan for, accommodate, respect and respond to students' emotional and learning needs. Such calls, as ascertained in the SLR, are only minimal in other disciplines such as Creative Arts (1 paper), Business and Management (1 paper), Sports Science (1 paper) and STEM (2 papers).

Conclusion

As higher education undergoes review and scrutiny by the current Commonwealth government in Australia, the place of kindness, inclusive of attributes including empathy, compassion, honesty, gratitude, trust, and humility (see https://thekindnesscurriculum.com), has not been explicitly identified at the level of policy or as a national priority. The proliferation of research that has emerged since 2019 has the potential to significantly improve the sector's understanding of the role of kindness in higher education, but the systematic literature review suggests scant attention to kindness at the governance level of higher education providers, including universities. However, what is featured strongly on both the political and higher education agendas is reshaping graduate attributes to reflect workplace and employer demands more closely. The predominant view is that to be successful, graduates will need to possess non-technical skills, which are social and emotional in nature, such as empathy, kindness, leadership, flexibility, resilience, adaptability, and communication (Mohd & Abid, 2020). Deloitte Access Economics (2017) forecasts that the number of jobs in soft skill-intensive occupations are expected to grow at 2.5 times the rate of jobs in other occupations and that by 2030, it is anticipated that soft skill-intensive occupations will make up almost two thirds of the workforce. According to Billing et al. (2021), companies' skill-building efforts have focused on building employees' social, emotional, and advanced cognitive skills. Whilst many universities embedded graduate attributes including life-long learning, generic, transferable, or soft skills focussing on graduate employability (Oliver, 2011), into their courses, deeper attention is warranted from the perspective of research. In fact, it can be argued in this context that an immediate rethink of the graduate attributes is required to be more inclusive of soft skills, including the attributes of kindness in preparation for a more meaningful education, one that prepares students more appropriately in a poly-crisis environment (Tooze, 2023) in ways that respond to both human endeavour and employer needs and demands. Other educational environments, such as schools in Australia, are moving in this direction (see Kindness Curriculum at https://thekindnesscurriculum.com), and it is timely for higher education to review its mission, values, strategy and programs as the sector reconsiders its future purposes.

For kindness to be truly embraced in higher education, it must feature in strategic, operational, and academic agendas. Whilst further research and a robust evidence base will support these endeavours, higher education leaders must take up the challenge and value kindness for human, social, and economic advancement. Currently, despite

COVID-19's push towards kindness research, reform is slow and minimalist. For the higher education providers who are keen to take up the challenge, the words of Waddington (2018) are instructive:

> ..., in the future, universities (and higher education providers) that can demonstrate their compassionate credentials and pedagogy will be the successful universities, and this requires kindness in leadership and compassionate institutional cultures. Therefore, ... in order to nurture cultures of compassion, universities (and higher education providers) require their leaders – as the carriers of culture – to embody compassion in their leadership practice. However, this needs to be a shared approach, rather than a dominant, hierarchical top-down approach, and is characterised by openness, curiosity, kindness, authenticity, appreciation and above all compassion. (Waddington, 2018, p. 87)

This is a call for higher education providers to look to schools in Australia as well as the empirical literature for inspiration. As many schools throughout the nation are inviting their students and communities to value kindness (or its equivalent) as central to their core business of education, so too higher education providers can think towards the future in preparing their graduates with knowledge, skills and dispositions that contribute to building a better world for generations to come. Koschel (2023) has noted in her text: "As humans evolved, we have learned that kindness is important - maybe the most important thing of all - for any functioning society". What better place to embed kindness than in higher education, one of the most influential spaces in Australia for human flourishing and development.

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