



Mindfulness on the edge: Practitioner reflections on student wellbeing and coping in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This reflective practitioner article explores how mindfulness functions as a coping strategy for students navigating the emotional and cognitive challenges of higher education (HE). Drawing on early findings from a doctoral study involving qualitative interviews with undergraduates, and informed by my own experiences as a doctoral candidate and practitioner-researcher, the article examines how mindfulness is taken up, interpreted, and negotiated within HE settings. Using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis, and grounded in the critical literature on student wellbeing and mindfulness, this piece explores three emerging themes: mindfulness as a coping mechanism, the individualisation of wellbeing, and negotiating authenticity in practice. It also considers how insider-research and practitioner-led inquiry can inform more responsive and sustainable wellbeing interventions in FE and HE contexts.

Keywords: mindfulness, practitioner-led research, higher education, student well-being, coping strategies.

Framing the research: From lived experience to empirical inquiry

The motivation for this research is deeply rooted in my own struggles during the transition from master's to doctoral level. The initial development of my research proposal was fraught with uncertainty. Despite having prior academic success, I found myself repeatedly questioning my competence — a common experience among doctoral students and one closely associated with imposter syndrome (Parkman, 2016). Institutional messaging around doctoral study emphasised autonomy and self-direction but offered limited scaffolding for wellbeing or emotional regulation.

Mindfulness entered my journey not as a formal institutional offer but as a personal resource drawn from prior experience. I began applying simple mindfulness techniques — body scans, breath awareness, mindful walking — during times of anxiety and cognitive overload. These practices enabled me to centre my attention and remain committed to my research, particularly during emotionally volatile periods. This lived experience became a provocation: If mindfulness helped me, how were other students navigating stress, and what role, if any, did mindfulness play in their coping strategies?

This question led me to review the growing evidence base around mindfulness in HE contexts. Galante et al.'s (2018) 'Mindful Student Study', a randomised controlled trial conducted at Cambridge University, offered compelling evidence that mindfulness courses reduced psychological distress and bolstered wellbeing. Similarly, Goyal et al. (2014) and Khoury et al. (2015) established mindfulness as an empirically supported method for managing anxiety and depression, while Shapiro et al. (2008) conceptualised it as a

tool for cultivating metacognitive awareness — a particularly useful skill in academic contexts. These insights helped shape both my conceptual framework and my methodology.

Context and rationale

The transition to doctoral study marked a significant shift in my academic and professional identity. Unlike previous stages of education, this phase demanded high levels of autonomy, self-direction, and emotional resilience. As outlined above, my own early struggles with imposter syndrome and isolation heightened my awareness of the gaps in formal wellbeing provision for students. These experiences, combined with my role as a practitioner in further and higher education (FE/HE), created a dual perspective: living the challenges of academic research while observing the structural limitations of institutional support.

This article arises from a broader doctoral study examining undergraduate experiences of mindfulness in HE, with my own experience providing a reflexive backdrop rather than the primary focus. The rationale is grounded in increasing concern about student mental health in HE (Hughes et al., 2018) and growing interest in scalable, sustainable interventions like mindfulness-based programmes (Galante et al., 2021). However, the study also critically engages with tensions in the field — including debates around the individualisation of wellbeing, the commodification of mindfulness, and the role of authenticity in practice (Purser, 2019; Stanley, 2012).

Adopting a practitioner-researcher lens, I approach the project reflexively, acknowledging the influence of my dual roles on the research process. This article presents initial findings and reflections, positioning mindfulness as more than a stress-management tool: rather, it is a site of negotiation, tension, and potential transformation in the lived experiences of students and educators alike. While informed by my own engagement with mindfulness, the analysis centres student voices, exploring how they experience, interpret, and apply mindfulness within the broader context of academic life. In doing so, I contribute to a growing body of critical scholarship that questions the taken-for-granted assumptions behind mindfulness interventions in education (e.g., Purser, 2019; Stanley, 2012) and argue for the value of practitioner-led research in designing more contextually meaningful and ethically grounded wellbeing strategies.

The next section outlines the methodology, including participant recruitment, data collection, and ethical considerations.

Methodology and participants

The study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with HE students from undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Participants were recruited across disciplines, and interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Recruitment took place via alumni networks and departmental mailing lists to ensure a range of perspectives. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis, which foregrounds researcher subjectivity and the co-construction of meaning. Given my dual role as both researcher and mindfulness practitioner, reflexivity was vital to acknowledge potential biases and interpretive positions (Finlay, 2002).

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the BLSS Research Ethics Committee at Birmingham City University on 6 January 2020, as part of a doctoral study undertaken through Nottingham Trent University. The application was processed via the Worktribe ethics management system under the title: “Exploring the benefits of mindfulness based on students’ accounts of their experiences.” The research was classified as medium risk due to the focus on wellbeing and adhered to the University’s ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All participants were provided with detailed information sheets, gave informed consent, and were assured of anonymity and the secure storage of their data in accordance with GDPR requirements.

Emerging themes: Key findings

Three major themes were identified through analysis:

Mindfulness as a coping mechanism in academic stress

Participants reported using mindfulness to manage academic pressure, emotional dysregulation, and performance anxiety. For many, mindfulness was self-initiated rather than institutionally promoted, closely echoing my own early experiences described in the Framing the Research section. Students described using techniques such as breathwork, meditation apps, or informal mindful awareness (e.g., pausing before deadlines) to stay grounded. This aligns with Galante et al.’s (2021) findings that mindfulness not only reduces distress but supports sustained academic engagement. However, several participants emphasised that mindfulness was not a cure-all, but rather one of many strategies they used — a nuanced perspective consistent with Hyland (2017).

The individualisation of wellbeing

Participants articulated frustrations with how wellbeing was framed as a personal responsibility. The majority experienced institutional support as reactive, fragmented, or overly reliant on digital signposting (e.g., online wellbeing portals). This resonates with critiques by Gill and Donaghue (2016) and Brown (2017), who argue that contemporary wellbeing discourse in HE reflects neoliberal ideologies that locate the problem — and solution — within the individual. Students often expressed that, while mindfulness could be beneficial, it risked being presented as yet another self-help obligation rather than part of a broader, systemic wellbeing strategy. This theme raises critical questions about the ethics of positioning mindfulness as a resilience tool without addressing systemic stressors.

Negotiating authenticity in mindfulness practice

Despite positive experiences, several students expressed uncertainty about whether they were ‘doing mindfulness right’. Some questioned its scientific legitimacy, while others worried it had become too commodified. These tensions reflect broader debates about the secularisation and instrumentalisation of mindfulness in Western contexts (Purser, 2019; Stanley, 2012). For students from religious or cultural backgrounds where contemplative practices already existed, mindfulness sometimes felt culturally dislocated. These perspectives suggest that, to be effective and inclusive, mindfulness interventions must be culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and pedagogically grounded rather than tokenistic.

Practitioner reflexivity and institutional change

The three themes outlined above not only reflect participant experiences but also resonate strongly with my own journey as a mindfulness practitioner and researcher. My engagement with this research has been transformative not only at the individual level but also in shaping institutional initiatives. In response to my own challenges and those of my peers, I established the Loughborough College Research Network, a grassroots initiative to support practitioner-led inquiry and foster a culture of shared reflection.

This network has hosted seminars, collaborative writing sessions, and collaborative research projects, including a co-authored article titled 'Breaking the Glass Ceiling in FE: The Story of the Loughborough College Research Network'. Through these activities, colleagues have been able to explore the emotional dimensions of research and teaching, validating experiences that are often marginalised in academic discourse.

This work has also sharpened my vision for future practice. I aim to design a six-week, research-informed mindfulness programme tailored to student wellbeing. Unlike generic institutional offers, this programme will draw directly from student narratives and be grounded in both academic theory and lived experience. It will include guided practices, reflective journaling, peer support, and critical dialogue around mental health in academia — a holistic approach that moves beyond stress reduction to cultivate awareness, compassion, and systemic critique.

Building on these principles, I have also founded The Student Wellness Hub CIC — a social enterprise dedicated to delivering research-informed, accessible wellbeing interventions for students in further and higher education. The Hub's programmes, informed by this doctoral research, aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering contextually relevant workshops, resources, and peer-led initiatives. This dual role as researcher and practitioner enables me to embed empirical insights directly into service design, ensuring interventions are both evidence-based and responsive to student needs.

Looking forward: Implications and next steps

The integration of research findings into practical, student-facing initiatives such as The Student Wellness Hub CIC marks a significant step towards ensuring that mindfulness interventions are not only theoretically sound but also responsive to lived realities. As I continue to collect data and refine my themes, I hope to explore further intersections between mindfulness, identity, and institutional culture. In particular, I am interested in how mindfulness might be embedded within curriculum design, academic skills training, and staff development — not as a bolt-on but as a core pedagogical value.

Future phases of the Hub's work will test and evaluate these embedded approaches in partnership with universities and colleges, creating an iterative cycle between research, practice, and evaluation. This will allow for continuous refinement and ensure that interventions remain relevant to shifting student needs and diverse learning contexts.

I also plan to expand my practitioner scholarship through publications and training as a yoga teacher, further integrating mind-body approaches into HE contexts. In doing so, my aim is to model a reflective,

research-led practice that others in the sector can adapt and build upon, contributing to a broader cultural shift towards holistic, evidence-based wellbeing provision in education.

Ultimately, this research reflects a dual commitment: to generate robust empirical knowledge about mindfulness and student wellbeing, and to model a reflective, compassionate academic praxis grounded in both theory and lived experience. Through the combined efforts of scholarly inquiry and practical delivery via The Student Wellness Hub, I hope to demonstrate that mindfulness in HE can move beyond individual coping to become a catalyst for systemic, sustainable change.

Biography

Kelly-Marie Winfield is a doctoral researcher and higher education practitioner at Loughborough College. Her research explores mindfulness and student wellbeing in university settings. She co-founded the Loughborough College Research Network and is committed to enhancing academic practice and student support through reflective inquiry, practitioner research, and evidence-based wellbeing interventions.

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