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A focus on regulating difficult emotions

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PROMOTING THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THROUGH MINDFULNESS: A FOCUS ON REGULATING DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study explores the potential of a mindfulness programme for providing psycho-social support to international students in higher education. The article focuses on analysing the nature of emotional distress among students, how they regulate difficult emotions, and the effects of the mindfulness programme on emotion regulation. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with students before and after the mindfulness programme, and the weekly mindfulness sessions were observed. The study identified that stress, anxiety, anger, sadness, loneliness and insecurity were among the most difficult emotions experienced by international students. Through mindfulness, students improved in awareness of their emotions, learnt to relate to difficult emotions more constructively, and regulated negative emotions more effectively. Nevertheless, many suggested that they would have welcomed more attention to emotion regulation, as it was identified as a key challenge in their lives. These findings have important implications for the psycho-social well-being and academic achievement of international students.

Introduction
There has been growing interest in incorporating mindfulness programmes into higher education to promote universal mental health and stimulate contemplative learning. Some universities have been exploring how mindfulness meditation can be integrated into the curriculum to enhance student engagement and understanding of subject matter and to contribute to the development of a set of skills that are central to the learning process, such as concentration, attention, awareness, open-mindedness and information processing (Bush 2011; Rogers 2013). Furthermore, mindfulness is sought after due to its proven effects in reducing stress, cultivating emotional balance, and building important affective and interpersonal capacities that foster psychological well-being (Shapiro, Brown, and Astin 2011).
One Dutch university began offering an eight-week mindfulness programme in 2013 for its growing number of international students. The programme is offered by the Student Psychologists Centre; it aims to support international students with their adjustment difficulties and stressors through helping to cultivate awareness about their thoughts and feelings, promoting self-compassion and self-care, and showing them how to cope with stress in more constructive ways. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of students who participated in the mindfulness programme during the spring of 2016. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with participating students before and after the mindfulness programme, and mindfulness sessions were observed. This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the most commonly experienced negative emotions among the international students who have chosen to participate in this mindfulness programme?
2. How do international students regulate negative emotions, and what challenges do they encounter?
3. From the perspectives of international students, what are the outcomes of the mindfulness programme as far as regulating negative emotions?

Offering mindfulness training to international students as a form of psycho-social support is a relatively new phenomenon. Furthermore, most of the studies on mindfulness are based on quantitative approaches (Shapiro, Brown, and Astin 2011; Tarrasch 2015), while this study incorporates a series of in-depth interviews and extensive observations across the weekly mindfulness sessions. As such, the study offers rich accounts of students’ inner worlds and lived experiences with mindfulness. Grossman and Van Dam (2011, 235) urge for more qualitative studies on the grounds that they ‘are likely to provide greater insight into psychological mechanisms and characteristics associated with mindfulness than five minute self-report inventories, especially because semantic complexities and response biases may be better addressed in one-on-one interactions’.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section, an overview of the literature on the psycho-social well-being of international students and mindfulness interventions in higher education is presented, with a particular focus on the relevance of mindfulness for emotion regulation. Then, the methodological choices in this study are outlined, and the findings are presented under three sections, in alignment with the three research questions: commonly experienced negative emotions among international students, strategies to regulate negative emotions, and the impact of the mindfulness
programme on emotion regulation. Finally, the main findings are discussed in relation to comparable studies, and their implications are considered.

Psycho-social well-being among international students

University life appears to be stressful, as many students experience mental health problems and social difficulties. A recent iteration of the American College Health Association’s annual survey (ACHA 2016) involving 33,512 students at 51 campuses revealed that a considerable proportion of respondents reported that within the past two weeks they had felt hopelessness (21.5%), overwhelmed (55.8%), exhausted (54.1%), very lonely (27.9%), very sad (30.5%), depression that impaired functioning (14.7%) and overwhelming anxiety (28.5%). For international students, everyday life at host universities could be even more stressful. These sojourners’ experience can involve alienation and disorientation, as well as uncertainties and anxieties about the future. Hence, rather than experiencing an enticing journey, ‘the negative effects of acculturation could have an adverse impact on students’ day-to-day functioning and academic performance’ (Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield 2016, 2199).

Some of the most commonly experienced difficulties among international students are the absence of friendships with domestic students, loneliness, homesickness and social isolation. Due to language difficulties and diverse cultural norms, many international students maintain a limited friend circle with only international peers. Furthermore, in comparison to local students who are often connected to friends and family, international students are often positioned as ‘others’ or may be isolated during social interactions (Arthur 2017). Studies have indicated that international students report higher levels of homesickness than domestic students, since they may have a harder time adjusting to the new environment (Poyrazli and Lopez 2007).

In addition to interpersonal problems, international students are confronted with linguistic, financial and academic challenges, which induce additional stress and anxiety. The language barrier emerges as one of the most significant problems. It has negative implications, as it is closely related to students’ academic performance and overall integration (Arthur 2017; Heng 2018). Moreover, compared to domestic students, international students experience more anxiety regarding making decisions about their future. This decision-making process not only involves future career plans, but also concerns their sense of identity, cultural values and beliefs (Jiang 2017). Furthermore, international students’ encounters with discrimination are acknowledged as a threat to their emotional well-being (Brown and Jones 2013). Some evidence has indicated that various sources of stress place international students at high risk of psychological problems (Jung,
Hecht, and Wadsworth 2007). Diverse symptoms include depression, frustration, isolation and hopelessness, as well as physiological conditions (Mori 2000). Psychological and emotional well-being is crucial to students’ quality of life, happiness, personal growth, self-esteem, self-acceptance, positive relationships and autonomy (Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002).

**Emotion regulation and mindfulness**

Emotions are oftentimes described as irresistible and overpowering forces that direct human behaviour. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that people are flexible in responding to emotions; that they are not helplessly hijacked or carried away by their emotions (Koole 2009). The processes through which people manage their own emotional states (including moods, stress, and positive and negative affect) are commonly referred to as emotion regulation. It can be an unconscious or conscious process that involves observing, accepting, understanding, interpreting and responding to emotions (Gross 1998; Koole 2009). Through such processes individuals attempt to ‘influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions’ (Gross 1998, 275).

Emotion regulation is a key component of human health, development and social functioning. Problems with emotion regulation can deplete emotional and cognitive resources, and severe forms of regulation difficulties can lead to different forms of psychopathology, including depression, anxiety disorders, and bipolar or borderline personality disorder. Avoiding emotions is one of the most common but less adaptive emotion regulation mechanisms. It may be useful at times, but prolonged resorting to this strategy is ineffective and detrimental. It may involve distraction, cognitive distortion, suppression, denial, self-harm, substance abuse, disassociation and suicide. Another common maladaptive strategy entails the opposite tendency of becoming preoccupied, consumed and flooded by emotions. Such overengagement with emotive states can include rumination, worry, obsessions and compulsive behaviours (Hayes and Feldman 2004).

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is credited with mainstreaming mindfulness in the West, refers to mindfulness as ‘the art of conscious living’. He describes it as ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally’ (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 4), and contends that mindfulness has to do with ‘examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive’ (3). Two of the most popular and widely researched mindfulness approaches are mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). There have been efforts to incorporate mindfulness within higher education settings, either by offering MBSR, MBCT or some other structured training programmes to students and staff, or
by integrating distinct mindfulness practices in the curriculum content and pedagogical approaches (Rechtschaften 2014).

A systematic review of the research evidence indicates that mindfulness is associated with enhancement of positive mood, reduction of distractive thoughts and behaviours, decreased levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and enhancement of psychological well-being (Shapiro, Brown, and Astin 2011). Moreover, an evaluative review of 83 controlled interventions at higher education institutions, with a focus on three main outcomes (social and emotional skills, self-perceptions and emotional distress), concluded that mindfulness training was the most effective intervention (Conley, Durlak, and Dickson 2013). Mindfulness programmes improved students’ social and emotional skills, enhanced their self-perceptions, and reduced their levels of emotional distress (e.g. depression, anxiety and stress). These outcomes are significant, since emotional distress constitutes the most commonly experienced adjustment problem of higher education students (Conley, Durlak, and Dickson 2013).

Mindfulness training contributes to emotion regulation as it teaches the practice of non-judgemental awareness of present-moment experiences. By differentiating the self from experienced thoughts, feelings and emotions, mindfulness practitioners learn to distance themselves from their experiences, and to observe and accept the unpleasant ones (Galla, Kaiser-Greenland, and Black 2016). As such, mindfulness allows for greater awareness of emotions (e.g. improved clarity of emotions and the ability to label one’s emotions); it improves the ability to discriminate and differentiate between discrete emotions, and enables individuals to view emotions less as mental states that demand immediate reaction and more as sources of information. Consequently, mindfulness training leads to less emotional reactivity to external stressors, and less emotional fluctuation (Greco, Baer, and Smith 2011). Moreover, mindfulness encourages an attitude of gently attending to difficult emotions that are habitually uncomfortable or painful, rather than covering them up, deflecting them or disregarding them. By contributing to improved awareness and acceptance of emotions, it lessens thought suppression and psychological inflexibility (Greco, Baer, and Smith 2011).

Within the context of ‘the exponential rise in interest and activity’ in mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 282), some studies suggest caution regarding the potential adverse effects of mindfulness programmes (Burrows 2016; Tarrasch 2015; Van Dam et al. 2018). Tarrasch’s qualitative study (2015, 1331) conveyed that ‘initial practice often brought up distressing sensations and feelings and unfamiliar awareness of their bodies or their mental or emotional states’. In another qualitative study with higher education students, Burrows (2016) reported that some students experienced a heightened sense of anxiety, stress and even panic, suggesting that mindfulness meditation may not be adequate for some vulnerable students. According to Ng
et al. (2017) many mindfulness programmes are based on a watered-down understanding of awareness, and while they focus on improving awareness of emotions and thoughts, the programmes oftentimes fail to cultivate discerning and un-clinging attitudes towards emotions. They maintain that ‘people with high levels of awareness alone, without discerning, may be clinging even more to their own … distress’ (Ng et al. 2017, 286–287).

Methodological approach

Since the study focuses on the lived experiences of international students, an exploratory and interpretive research approach was chosen. Qualitative research on mindfulness helps us to more deeply understand students’ experiences, as it helps explore students’ narratives and offers rich descriptions of the underlying processes of mindfulness experiences (see Tarrasch 2015) and their perceived outcomes.

Sample

The participants were students who joined a mindfulness programme offered in the spring of 2016. With the permission of the counselling centre that offered the programme, all students who joined the programme (n = 15) were invited through email to take part in the study, and 10 of them gave their written consent. The five students who did not respond to the invitation either did not join the mindfulness programme or dropped out after a few initial sessions. There were three male and seven female students in the sample, ranging from 21 to 27 years old. Except for a Dutch student, all the others were international students, coming from Germany (three), China, Aruba, Canada, Italy, Turkey and Romania/South Africa. Four students were enrolled in bachelor’s programmes, three in one-year master’s programmes, and three in research master’s programmes. They were enrolled in various educational programmes, but the majority were studying in the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences. Moreover, the psychologist who taught the programme also participated in the research. She was 41 years old, with 11 years of work experience as a cognitive therapist and a qualified mindfulness trainer. The participants are assigned pseudonyms used throughout the paper in order to preserve their anonymity. Table 1 presents some background information on the sample.

Programme information

The mindfulness programme offered by the Student Psychologists Centre was initiated by two psychologists in 2013; it focused on international students. However, domestic students were welcomed when there was
space available. The programme was based on MBCR but adaptations were made for young people, to focus particularly on aspects that would relate to students’ lives and their common stressors (e.g. more emphasis on study stress management, energy management and self-compassion). The usual emphasis of MBCR on depression (Williams and Penman 2011) was removed from this adapted programme. Moreover, drawing meditation (drawing something as detailed as possible with the aim of realising how much more you can observe when you focus with full attention) and writing meditation (writing a personal letter to oneself to be received after two months as a reminder of being mindful) were added.

The weekly sessions lasted for two and a half hours each, and the students met with the psychologist a total of eight times. The sessions took place in a regular classroom and started with a guided meditation and discussions of student experiences with homework assignments. During the sessions, the psychologist offered some general information about human psychology, common challenges (particularly among students) and mindfulness philosophy. Furthermore, a number of mindfulness practices were engaged in individually or in groups (e.g. guided meditations, breathing, visualisation, journaling, slow tasting, cognitive inquiry in pairs), and reflections on felt experiences and insights were shared in the plenary. The sessions ended with students’ general impressions, and explanations about the homework assignments.

The homework assignments included a range of daily practices, such as body scan or performing a chosen routine action (e.g. preparing breakfast or brushing teeth). Students were also requested to keep a daily practice log. Practising mindfulness outside of weekly sessions is key to realising the positive outcomes of mindfulness (Chaskalson 2014). However, the psychologist did not pressure students to practise regularly. She was concerned that such pressure might backfire and students might perceive mindfulness as yet
another set of obligations. Moreover, she believed that different practices work for different people. During the sessions, the importance of a non-competitive and non-judgemental attitude was underscored.

**Data collection**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted before \((n = 10)\) and after \((n = 8)\) the programme. (Two students dropped out of the programme due to a busy schedule or loss of interest.) The interviews were conducted individually in an office or meeting room at the university and were all audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. The average length was 56 minutes for the first interview and 47 minutes for the second. A range of issues were explored during the interviews: the first round focused on personal history, current challenges and stressors, motivations, the nature of the difficult emotions they experienced, and how they regulated them. The second set of interviews engaged with topics such as their experiences with the mindfulness programme, homework assignments, and the impact of the programme on emotion regulation. The psychologist was also interviewed to gather insights about international students and the programme. Moreover, data were gathered by observing seven out of the eight mindfulness sessions. The researcher, who has been a regular mindfulness practitioner for five years, took extensive notes about the psychologist’s informational talks, the activities, student reflections and questions. Observations were key to gain insights into students’ processes, and to establish good rapport with the participants.

**Data analysis**

All 19 interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). For this purpose, a code list was developed based on a literature review and the first reading of the interviews. The list was used to code all interviews using ATLAS.ti version 7.1.6. During the coding procedure, a few new codes were added. Later, the quotations for each code were read, summaries were made and preliminary findings were drafted. In this process, a research master’s student was also involved as a coder, to compare the analysis and minimise any possible oversight or bias. The preliminary analysis notes were discussed and possible differences in understanding or interpretations were explored. In order to improve the reliability of the findings, the findings were discussed at length with the psychologist who led the mindfulness programme. Since this article focuses on international students, the Dutch student (Eliza) was omitted from the analysis and presentation of findings below.
Emotional distress among international students

The accounts of the psychologist (who had many years of counselling experience with international students) and some students in the sample testified that studying abroad came with additional stressors and challenges. Based on her personal experience and interactions with other international students, Amy confirmed that ‘international students are a vulnerable group’, more predisposed to anxiety, depression and rumination. Both Hannah and David reaffirmed Amy’s conclusions, noting ‘There is no doubt’ about it. The psychologist maintained that this group of students has a pressing need for grounding and feeling rooted. In line with Amy’s observations, the psychologist also suggested that international students are more susceptible to depression and other stress-related problems since they experience more study pressures, such as meeting academic performance criteria for their scholarships. Consequently, despite its allures and promises, studying abroad appears to expose students to a range of unforeseen challenges and complexities. Some students argued that they were not knowledgeable about these challenges in advance and were not prepared for them. Amy, for instance, commented that she was ill informed about what was in store for her, while the psychologist added that international students might be ‘unaware’ of the challenges ahead. Students were explicitly asked about the most difficult emotions they were experiencing at the time of the research. They indicated the following: heightened levels of stress, anxiety, worry, fears about the future, anger, sadness, loneliness, feelings of rejection, insecurity, and a sense of feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope with demands.

Except for one bachelor’s student, all of the students in the sample were completing their degree programmes that semester. Therefore, they were at an important transition period in their lives and needed to make some important life choices. All of this meant increased levels of stress, anxiety, worry and, for some, sleep difficulties. Furthermore, they believed that there were a lot of demands on them and felt that they were running from one deadline to another, while at the same time they were looking for PhD positions or other job opportunities. There was a pervasive sense that their lives were ‘very busy’, ‘pretty stressful’ and ‘overwhelming’. Benjamin contended: ‘It is always like deadline to deadline, cannot really relax’, while Sophie discussed intense, stressful moments, and how it seemed to her that there were too many demands on her. At such moments, she was overwhelmed by a sense of ‘I cannot do all of this’. She felt immobilised, and felt like giving up everything, including her pursuit of studies in the Netherlands. Sophie remarked that during such periods, she felt like whatever she did failed. This reinforced her sense of feeling overwhelmed, powerless and incompetent.
Some students experienced more stress due to their personal circumstances. For instance, Amy came with a scholarship for which she had to perform very well. Moreover, she did not want to go back to her home country, and hence felt heightened levels of pressure to have an outstanding performance and secure a PhD position. Hannah confirmed that grades were very stressful for international students. She and other international students were told that grades were lower in the Netherlands, and that seven is a good grade. But Hannah refuted: ‘No, seven is not a good grade’. She added that the Dutch educational system is quite different, and if a student did not complete his or her BA in the Netherlands, these differences would come as quite a shock to them. The new rules, regulations and standards appeared to be a source of stress and anxiety. Amy, who resonated with such stresses, shared that large differences between educational systems and cultures generated a sense of insecurity, performance anxiety and increased need for external validation. Consequently, her learner identity and self-efficacy suffered.

While experiencing such high levels of stress and anxiety, these international students also lacked their familiar social support systems. Indeed, there were several accounts of feeling homesick, loneliness, sadness, lacking friendships with domestic students, and feeling ‘shell-shocked’ (David), because of the major changes they had undergone, such as experiencing a new continent, country, academic setting, language, culture and social environment. According to the psychologist, international students remained in their own circle, having little contact with Dutch students. Amy contended that in her relatively small MA programme the Dutch students did not seem to be interested in being friends with international students, and these two groups rarely joined for social activities. She argued that international students felt urgency in building new friendships, while the Dutch students had their long-term friends and did not feel such motivation for new connections. Likewise, Hannah commented that ‘when you are studying abroad, friends are your family’. Yet, despite having studied in the Netherlands for five years, she did not have a single female Dutch friend, only international friends. She considered this rather odd, particularly because she came from a country that is geographically and culturally in close proximity to the Netherlands.

Regulating negative emotions

Several students reported that they found it hard to ‘be present’ with difficult emotions and deal with them constructively. They tended to talk to friends and family, and used some strategies that they labelled as ‘ineffective’ or ‘wrong’ techniques. These included avoidance, suppression or denial of negative emotions. The psychologist also noted that for many students, simply being with negative emotions and feeling them fully was very threatening. In
her general practice as a psychologist, she had met a number of students who were somewhat scared of looking within.

Sarah did not bottle things up within herself and she often talked to friends about the things that bothered her. She actively sought out her best friend to talk with and to express her feelings openly. She also noted that when she had a problem, she often thought a lot about it and tried to see solutions. James talked to friends as well and expressed his negative feelings. He also maintained that he would distinguish his pain and negative feelings from his real self: ‘I feel sad today, but this is not my real self ... it is part of me, though, I accept that’. Most of his negative feelings were related to anxiety and worry about the future, uncertainties and his PhD application. Where would life take him next? What would happen? David, too, commented that he would accept his feelings and not try to fight them off: ‘When I am feeling crap, I am feeling crap’. He would talk to someone around, but he often did not like ‘uploading his negativity onto others’, fearing overburdening them or lowering their energy levels. If there was no one around to talk to, he would feel melancholic, sit in his room, feel down, analyse things, overthink, and doubt or regret some of his decisions.

For other students in the group there was less of a sense of autonomy and competence in dealing with negative emotions. For Julia, who had been suffering from prolonged depression, difficult emotions were overwhelming. She expressed that she did not really know how to cope with such emotions. She often repressed them out of fear (e.g. through alcohol consumption, starting at a young age), or she denied her emotions by making herself believe that these emotions were not authentic. Friends or family also advised her not to take emotions ‘too seriously’. Julia expressed her desire to feel more emotions. Hannah, too, had been feeling rather stressed about her studies and life, and she found her self-directed anger most difficult to deal with. During her childhood, she often cried and felt overwhelmed by emotions. Her account also pointed to having permeable emotional boundaries and absorbing everyone’s emotions: ‘As a child, I always felt like I took on everyone’s emotions. So, when someone was angry I got very nervous and I still have it sometimes. If people around me are very nervous and angry I would get the same emotions’.

Hannah thought she was often using the ‘wrong techniques’, such as escaping through watching TV, or suppressing her emotions instead of acknowledging and expressing them. She also resorted to activities as an escape mechanism: ‘I keep busy, I guess’. She believed that these strategies were not healthy. Benjamin also tended to avoid his negative feelings. As soon as he noticed that a negative emotion arose, he pushed it away and attempted to suppress it. Watching TV (sometimes for days in a row) often helped him in this endeavour, and his awareness of negative emotions faded away; he simply did not feel them anymore. He was taught that
showing his emotions was a weakness and would make him vulnerable. For Amy, anger was the most difficult emotion, and she often expressed this towards her (ex)boyfriend. She was aware that this not only was harming him and the relationship, but also had harmful repercussions for her. She would burst into tears, and often resort to alcohol to relax from the grip of powerful, negative emotions.

**Perceived impact of the mindfulness programme**

In various sessions, the programme highlighted the importance of acceptance and allowing the full spectrum of emotions. The psychologist maintained during one session that it is important to learn to be with emotions in a non-judgemental manner, and accept them without fighting with them: ‘When you battle things, they get bigger …. When you allow your feelings, you are less attached’. Following the mindfulness programme, all international students experienced improvements—though to different degrees—with regard to becoming more aware of emotions, in relating to them in more constructive ways, and in better regulating the negative ones.

For Benjamin, developing greater awareness of difficult emotions and letting the negative emotions ‘just be’—as opposed to being evasive or avoidant—was a turning point. He reported developing a compassionate attitude towards himself and his emotions, and an attitude of wanting to understand where they come from. He felt less frightened when negative emotions arose:

> It feels more like I do not scare as easily as before, but now I can be more OK … take a pause or do something to kind of take care of myself … I am more accepting in a way and also compassionate … I do not have to push it away: it is part of me. [I am] still figuring out how to deal with it, but I guess just letting it be there and not trying to push it away or avoid it …. It kind of releases the energy that I used to suppress emotions.

Charlotte’s account resonated with Benjamin’s fear of confronting difficult emotions. She reported that with the mindfulness programme, she learnt to accept and acknowledge negative emotions but she still thought it was scary to be with such emotions. At least now she knew some tools she could use, which gave her a sense of competence and empowerment. She developed an attitude of being more gentle and compassionate with herself, which helped in better relating to the negative side of her feelings.

Hannah reported that, particularly with the help of meditation, she learnt to stay with difficult emotions and gradually developed an ability to deal with her sense of unrest more easily. James commented that he felt rebooted after each session, since he felt his negative emotions or desperation about the rejections (he was applying for PhD positions at the time)
were emptied out and cleansed through the practices. Moreover, similar to Benjamin, being more at ease with feelings was an important lesson for James. When he felt bad, he learnt to allow himself to feel that feeling, instead of pushing himself towards a change or giving in to the pressure of ‘feeling bad is bad, so you need to feel positive’. Learning not to judge feelings and just allowing them, feeling them and being with them were remarkable experiences.

Sarah experienced most benefits in this respect in relation to stress. She no longer felt overwhelmed by the stresses in her life or the thoughts that amplified those stresses. She was able to guide them instead and calm herself down: ‘It is good to kind of gather myself again …. So, I definitely think it helps … kind of knowing what kind of tools I can use in which situations, knowing how to access them … something that is gonna be very useful in the future’.

These accounts mainly refer to regulating emotions that are labelled as ‘difficult’ or ‘negative’. However, David reported the importance of developing an attitude of non-attachment with both positive and negative emotions. He observed how this attitude was gradually developing within him, but he was ‘still not there yet’. He noted that when something good happened, he no longer wanted to overemphasise it. Likewise, when something bad happened, he did not dwell too much on it or amplify it with streams of thoughts. He emphasised the significance of developing an attitude of balancing, of being mellow, and avoiding all emotional highs and lows. He believed that such an attitude also made him less emotionally vulnerable to the events unfolding in his life or to external stimuli in general.

Furthermore, students indicated that as a result of improved emotion regulation, they were more present here and now, more emotionally balanced, had improved awareness about their needs, aspirations and inner worlds in general, and enjoyed improved levels of inner peace, and that their self-confidence and capacity in dealing with (internal and external) stressors were enhanced. Despite these positive developments, four students believed that the programme could have emphasised emotion regulation even more. Indeed, most discussions concerning omissions within the programme centred around this issue. Hannah reaffirmed that emotion regulation is a critical aspect for most students and indicated more attention to this during the initial weeks would have been valuable:

There is a lot of trouble from the past …. How do you deal with negative emotions that would come up? It comes so late. So for me it was fine, but I can imagine that for people that are really struggling and really have psychological issues, like real anxiety or depression, that another course might be better …. Where you learn about regulation of emotions earlier on.

David’s comments corroborated Hannah’s sentiments, and he cautioned that if emotion regulation is not addressed sufficiently, some students might opt
for early drop-out from the programme: ‘Because it is heavy stuff. I mean, some people, I think that is why they run away, because as soon as you start meditating and all those emotions come out, it can overwhelm you and crush you’.

Benjamin also would have liked more attention to acknowledging and allowing difficult emotions. He mentioned in particular the usefulness of RAIN (recognition, allowance, interest and naturalness), a widely known technique for training self-regulation of emotions (see Brach 2013).

Conclusion

This study explored difficult emotions experienced by international students, common emotion regulation strategies, and the perceived impact of the mindfulness programme on these processes. When students were asked about the nature of their difficult emotions, they reported stress, anxiety, anger, fear of the future, loneliness, rejection, insecurities and feeling incapable of meeting demands. Such experiences of emotional distress are comparable to what has been observed in other studies and reports about university students (ACHA 2016; Conley, Durlak, and Dickson 2013). The most common ways of coping with negative emotions included seeking social support, and a set of strategies that were labelled by the participants as ‘wrong techniques’, including avoidance, suppression and denial of emotions. These suggest that students were not knowledgeable about how to accept, allow and engage with difficult emotions. The healing benefits of being fully present with difficult emotions without identifying with them were not clear to them; the general population similarly lacks this awareness (see Brach 2013). After the mindfulness programme, all international students reported improved awareness about their difficult emotions. They also learnt to accept, acknowledge and observe these emotions in a less attached manner, and felt less overwhelmed and frightened by their force. According to Ng et al. (2017) non-clinging, ‘which emphasises the ability to stand back from negative emotions’ (287), is indispensable for improving mental health. Their study suggests that ‘un-clinging, which creates freedom from negative emotions, is more strongly associated with well-being and stress reduction than mere awareness is’ (280).

As a result of these gains, students reported a more compassionate attitude towards themselves, improved stress management, less emotional vulnerability to external stimuli, and an enhanced sense of competence and empowerment in relating to difficult emotions. However, half of them also reported that they would have liked more attention to acknowledging, allowing and engaging more skilfully with difficult emotions. The reliance on qualitative data with a small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to all international students. Nonetheless, these findings suggest
that through improved emotion regulation, the mindfulness programme positively contributed to psychological well-being, endorsing the findings of earlier studies (Prakash et al. 2017). The results confirm that mindfulness has potential for addressing mental health promotion and issue prevention, and the psycho-social adjustment of international students. Additionally, learning to regulate difficult emotions through mindfulness might contribute to the resilience of university students, which is an important competency, ‘because it underpins the capacity of students to manage both their academic demands and the additional stressors of balancing of study with work and life’ (Stallman 2011, 122).

Moreover, the findings have implications for academic performance: mindfulness practices’ contribution to managing stress and distress more effectively is very important in educational contexts, since there is ample evidence that stress and anxiety can hamper cognitive performance (Shapiro, Brown, and Astin 2011). In addition, through its positive impact on emotion regulation, mindfulness helps to develop sustained and focused attention, concentration and reflection. These skills are key to successful learning, and foster open awareness and creativity (Zajonc 2013). Yet in most educational settings they are rarely, if ever, systematically cultivated in the regular curriculum programmes (Shapiro, Brown, and Astin 2011).

The results reveal a remarkable degree of enthusiasm and positive transformation among international students who participated in this study, and a desire to continue with some of the mindfulness practices. However, longitudinal follow-up studies are imperative in order to understand whether such positive effects are stable or transitory, and whether students’ eagerness is maintained in the long run (Dariotis et al. 2016). Furthermore, since developing mindfulness as a skill requires practice, and in most programmes few students attend mindfulness classes regularly and develop sustained mindfulness practice (Rogers 2013), future research can explore the reasons behind these patterns, and successful strategies that promote disciplined practice. Mindfulness programmes can be provided to higher education students more effectively if the students are fully informed about relevant theoretical foundations and empirical research. Such knowledge might improve student motivation to join mindfulness programmes and practise regularly. Furthermore, this study does not intend to reinforce a dichotomy between the needs and experiences of domestic and international students (Jones 2017), as integration of mindfulness into targeted services within universities could benefit both international and domestic students.
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Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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