



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Improving the psycho-social wellbeing of international students

The relevance of mindfulness

Kosar-Altinyelken, H.; Hoek, L.; Jiang, L.

DOI

[10.1080/03069885.2019.1600189](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2019.1600189)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

British Journal of Guidance & Counselling

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kosar-Altinyelken, H., Hoek, L., & Jiang, L. (2020). Improving the psycho-social wellbeing of international students: The relevance of mindfulness. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 48(4), 524–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2019.1600189>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Improving the psychosocial wellbeing of international students: the relevance of mindfulness

Hülya Kosar Altinyelken , Lianne Hoek  and Lina Jiang

Graduate School of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In this study we analysed the potential of a mindfulness programme for improving psychosocial wellbeing among students at a Dutch university. Based on interviews and observations of sessions, the study demonstrated that students joined the programme to manage stress and anxiety, cultivate self-awareness, and regulate difficult emotions. They all reported positive outcomes, but students who participated in the sessions regularly and did the homework assignments reported better outcomes, including enhanced self-awareness, self-care, and positive attitudes towards others. Although students reported improved emotion regulation, many still believed that the programme was less strong in this area. The study affirms the potential of mindfulness programmes for improving the psychosocial wellbeing, and builds a case for the integration of mindfulness interventions in university counselling services.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 November 2017
Revised 12 January 2019
Accepted 24 March 2019

KEYWORDS

International students; counselling in higher education; mindfulness in education; outcomes; qualitative research

Introduction

Becoming an international student entails a major change in the lives of young people, and involves geographical and psychological displacement. This inevitably challenges one's sense of wellbeing, habitual lifestyle, familiar social support systems, self-perceptions, and identity notions (Brown & Brown, 2013). Studies in Western country contexts have suggested that international students encounter a wide range of challenges, due (among other causes) to cultural differences, pressure to adjust to the new social and academic environment, language barriers, financial hardships and social isolation (see Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010).

The Netherlands is an increasingly popular destination for international students. In the 2016–2017 academic year, there were 112,000 international students, 81,392 of whom were degree students who enrolled for a full bachelor's or master's degree. This is both the highest number, and the highest annual growth (6,163) ever recorded in the Netherlands. The students represented 164 different nationalities, with German and Chinese students continuing to be the largest groups (Nuffic, 2017). One of the Dutch universities initiated a mindfulness programme based on Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) in 2013 for its increasing number of international students. The eight-week programme is offered by the Student Psychologists Centre as a counselling service, and aims to support international students in developing awareness about their thoughts and emotions, to promote self-compassion and self-care, and to help them cope with stress in more constructive ways. Although it mainly targets international students, domestic students are welcome when places are available.

CONTACT Hülya Kosar Altinyelken  h.k.altinyelken@uva.nl  Graduate School of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 127, 1018 WS, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

This study aims to analyse the experiences of international students who participated in the mindfulness programme during the spring of 2016. For this purpose, interviews were conducted with students before and after the programme, and the mindfulness sessions were observed. The study aimed at understanding students' motivations for joining the programme, thereby gaining insights into their major stresses and concerns, and explored in what ways students benefited from the programme. Our study is unique because offering mindfulness training to international students as a counselling service is a relatively new phenomenon, and the implications of mindfulness programmes in higher educational settings have so far received relatively less attention compared to other levels of education (De Bruin, Meppelink, & Bögels, 2015; Tarrasch, 2015). Moreover, most of the available research on mindfulness is based on quantitative methods (Broderick & Frank, 2014; Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011), while there are few qualitative studies on mindfulness programmes (Bihari & Mullan, 2012; Tarrasch, 2015). Bihari and Mullan (2012) analysed the experiences of 11 adult participants who took part in an MBCT programme in the UK. The clinical referral criteria for the MBCT programme included three or more recurrences of severe depression. Through in-depth interviews, the study analysed the impact of the programme on the participants' relationships with others. Tarrasch (2015), on the other hand, examined the process, experiences and outcomes of a two-semester training course designed for the students of the Tel Aviv University's School of Education. The study was based on an analysis of 19 students' weekly journal summaries. In contrast to these studies, we conducted in-depth interviews twice with the majority of the students before and after the programme, and observed the weekly sessions. Our methodology enables the exploration of student expectations, and the processes that can allow for the positive outcomes of mindfulness.

International students and psychosocial wellbeing

Studies on the internationalisation of higher education in the West have uncovered that international students encounter a myriad of difficulties and stresses, including adaptation to new social and academic norms, culture shock, difficulties in communication, insecurities about finances and accommodation, loss of established support and social networks, stereotyping and prejudice, lack of friendships with domestic students, social isolation, alienation and homesickness (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Li, 2017; Luzio-Lockett, 1998).

Several studies have indicated language difficulties as a major concern, as language ability is closely related to international students' academic success and overall integration. Lack of proficiency in the language of instruction and competence in a multicultural environment limits students' ability to succeed academically, which might at the same time undermine their psychological wellbeing (Sherry et al., 2010). Moreover, social isolation, loneliness, and the absence of friendships with domestic students emerge as major concerns (see Hendrickson et al., 2011). Difficulties with finances, academic and social integration, and interpersonal relationships induce additional stresses. Excessive exposure to stress might result in depression, anxiety, frustration, irritability, and isolation, and tends to undermine physical health (Mori, 2000). A study in Australia found that international students exhibit different ways of adapting within the host environment. Although some construct a positive sense of self, 41% of international students adapt to their experience in less positive ways, and have encountered high levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). These problems constitute major challenges for international students, suggesting that they are a vulnerable group, at high risk for psychological problems (Brown & Brown, 2013; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007). Consequently, some scholars have proposed that social, cultural or economic support should be provided by higher education institutions to ensure that international students have an enjoyable and enriching experience (Sherry et al., 2010).

Mindfulness in higher education

Mindfulness is described as a moment-to-moment awareness of the present moment in a non-reactive, non-judgemental and openhearted way (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). Interest in mindfulness programmes

has grown rapidly in the past decades, leading some to conclude that we are experiencing a quiet “mindfulness revolution” worldwide. The programmes teach practitioners skills that enable them to shift their attention to the here-and-now, and to respond—rather than react—more skilfully to whatever is actually happening. “Although different techniques have different goals, they share a focus on sharpening concentration or attention, building emotion regulation skills to effectively manage stress, and gaining self-knowledge” (Greenberg & Harris, 2011, p. 162).

Mindfulness is increasingly being applied in educational settings around the world (e.g. in the USA, the UK, Iceland and the Netherlands) through programmes such as Inner Kids, MindUp, and MindfulKids (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2015), yet the effort to introduce mindfulness into higher education in the West is a relatively recent phenomenon (Bamber & Schneider, 2016; Shapiro & Izett, 2008). Incorporating mindfulness into higher education is motivated not only by purposes of promoting universal mental health through mindfulness-based interventions, but also by the goal of stimulating contemplative learning (Bush, 2011; Ergas, 2018). Some universities (e.g. in the USA, the UK and the Netherlands) 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 (Rogers, 2013).

Emerging evidence suggests that mindfulness has a wide range of potential applications and benefits (Lynch, Gander, Nahar, Kohls, & Walach, 2018). A study conducted at a Dutch university (De Bruin et al., 2015) demonstrated that a mindfulness course in the curriculum of international students led to increased non-judgemental and non-reactive attitude towards their own thoughts, feelings, and emotions during the course period. Their mindfulness increased further in the period following the completion of the course. The authors concluded that such increased mindfulness may support students’ strategies for coping with stress and contribute significantly to their performance and quality of life. A systematic review of research on mindfulness meditation in higher education demonstrated that such programmes lead to enhancement of positive mood, reduction of distractive thoughts and behaviours, decreased levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and enhancement of psychological well-being (Shapiro et al., 2011). Another systematic review covering various controlled interventions in higher education focused on the impact of these interventions on three main outcomes: social and emotional skills, self-perceptions, and emotional distress. It was concluded in the review that mindfulness training was the most effective intervention, followed by cognitive behavioural strategies (Conley, Durlak, & Dickson, 2013).

Furthermore, a narrative synthesis of the research on the effects of mindfulness meditation on stress and anxiety in college students indicated promising results in reducing stress and anxiety. For instance, out of 40 studies that examined anxiety, 33 of them reported a significant decrease. Similarly, 38 studies that assessed self-reported stress concluded that mindfulness meditation reduced stress considerably. The synthesis also pointed out that 22 research teams (out of 24) reported increases in mindfulness among students (Bamber & Schneider, 2016). These findings were corroborated by a systematic review of literature on mindfulness-based interventions for health and social care undergraduate students. The review indicated that mindfulness has positive effects on “stress, mood and mindfulness levels, as well as anxiety, well-being, self-compassion and coping abilities” (O’Driscoll, Byrne, McGillicuddy, Lambert, & Sahn, 2017, p. 860).

Although mindfulness is advocated by some as a “super solution” to many ills of our contemporary society and eagerly embraced by a number of Western educational institutions as a relatively inexpensive and arguably low-risk practice, its potential negative implications need to be considered as well (De Witt, 2018). In a qualitative study with adults who experienced severe depression in recent years, Tarrasch (2015, p. 1331) reported that “initial practice often brought up distressing sensations and feelings and unfamiliar awareness of their bodies or their mental or emotional states”. Such increased access to suppressed experiences and emotions might—at least temporarily—lead to discomfort, fear, anxiety or other “negative” states (De Witt, 2018). The extensive review conducted

by Van Dam et al. (2018) identified 20 published case reports or observational studies in which the participants experienced serious or distressing moods following meditation at a level that warranted additional treatment or medical attention. These meditation-related “negative” instances included psychosis, depersonalisation, anxiety, panic, and traumatic memory re-experiencing. Furthermore, a qualitative study by Burrows (2016, pp. 284–285) reported “a range of unusual perceptions, sensations, and altered states and experiences of self as a result of mindfulness meditation” among higher education students, such as “heightened anxiety; a sense of panic; my heart beating madly; like my body is on auto pilot and its acting on its own accord; as though I need to find a way to maintain my sense of self”. Burrows suggested that mindfulness meditation may not be appropriate with some vulnerable young adults as mindfulness might unleash overwhelming emotional material. Although these studies suggest that caution must be exercised with regard to the potential negative impact of mindfulness, the majority of studies reviewed here confirm the overwhelming evidence that mindfulness benefits young people in a wide range of domains. In this study, we analysed the experiences of international students in an MBCT programme at a Dutch university, in order to explore their motivations for joining the programme and to understand what outcomes they have observed.

Method

Programme information

In 2013, a mindfulness programme was initiated by two psychologists as a counselling service particularly for international students at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and offered for free. It was based on the MBCT programme, but several adaptations were made to adapt it for university students. These included removal of the silence day; more emphasis on study stress management, energy management and self-compassion; and replacement of yoga exercises by small mindful movements. 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 eight-week programme had weekly sessions lasting for two and a half hours, conducted by a psychologist. The sessions occurred in a regular classroom. Students were initially seated around U-shaped tables. After three sessions, the tables were removed and the chairs were rearranged in a circle. This seating arrangement was considered more informal, allowing for more openness and better connection. The sessions started with a guided meditation and a discussion of student experiences with homework assignments. In addition to brief introductions to the philosophy and science behind mindfulness, the sessions included various practices including mindful movements, drawing meditation, writing exercises, breathing, visualisation, cognitive inquiry in pairs, and sharing reflections within the group. Mindfulness practices were followed by sharing of felt experiences and insights.

Weekly homework assignments were introduced at the end of each session and they were supposed to be practiced on a daily basis. These assignments included a range of practices. For instance, during the week following the first session, the students were expected to practice doing a body scan every day and to perform one chosen routine action (e.g. brushing teeth or drinking coffee) daily with mindfulness. Students were also asked to keep a practice log on a daily basis even when they did not practice mindfulness. The psychologist did not put pressure on students to meet these expectations. She believed that mindfulness should not become an obligation, and that students should feel free to practice whatever technique they found useful and whenever they felt like it. In addition, she maintained that different aspects of mindfulness work for different kinds of people: some find meditating beneficial, some like to do a body scan just before sleeping, and some others like to do bodily exercises. She suggested that giving students an obligation might even induce resistance. On the other hand, she was well aware of the importance of regular practice for outcomes: “You can experience the benefits of mindful meditation by

actually practicing it frequently". The dilemma of not wanting to impose a set of homework activities on students and at the same time wanting them to take these assignments seriously and make a regular commitment remained a recurring challenge. The psychologist described the programme as being experiential, and not so much a "talking-group". During the sessions, the importance of a non-striving and non-judgemental attitude was emphasised.

Participants

During spring 2016, 15 students enrolled in the mindfulness programme offered by the Student Psychologists Centre at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. With the permission of the Centre, students were invited through e-mail to cooperate in this study and 10 students gave their written informed consent. To ensure anonymity, we used pseudonyms and information revealing the identities of the students was removed. Seven female and three male students took part in our study. Their mean age was 24.4 years (range 21–27). Except for one Dutch student, all of the others were international students, coming from Germany (three), China, Aruba, Canada, Italy, Turkey and Romania/South Africa. The students were enrolled in diverse educational programmes but the majority were from the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences. Moreover, the psychologist who conducted the sessions took part in the study. She was 42 years old, and was a behavioural therapist who was trained as a mindfulness teacher (see Table 1).

Procedure

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews before ($n = 10$) and after ($n = 8$) the mindfulness programme. Two students dropped out of the programme: Sophie could not continue due to her busy schedule and Julia did not feel motivated any longer. The interviews were conducted individually in an office or meeting room at the university between March and May of 2016. The average duration of the interviews was 56 min before and 47 min after the mindfulness programme. The first set of interviews inquired about students' personal history, current challenges and stresses in their lives, and motivations for participating in the programme. The second set of interviews sought to understand how students experienced the sessions, the extent to which they practiced homework assignments, and the outcomes of the programme. The psychologist was also interviewed in order to gather additional data about international students and the mindfulness programme, and to discuss the major findings and their implications. Moreover, data were gathered through observing the mindfulness sessions. Seven out of eight sessions were observed and extensive notes were taken about the activities and student reflections. These observations were key to gaining insight into students' internal worlds and processes throughout the mindfulness programme, and also to establishing good rapport with them.

Table 1. Student demographic information.

Pseudonyms	Sex	Age	Study program	Number of sessions attended	Duration of the interviews	
					Before	After
Julia	Female	26	Bachelor – year 3	2/8	54:17	NA
Hannah	Female	24	Research master – year 2	7/8	54:40	46:24
James	Male	23	1 year master programme	8/8	1:04:39	1:04:36
Benjamin	Male	25	Bachelor – year 2	7/8	1:05:44	39:24
David	Male	27	1 year master programme	8/8	45:26	52:52
Sarah	Female	21	Bachelor – year 3	8/8	58:41	1:07:22
Eliza	Female	26	1 year master programme	5/8	1:16:56	34:56
Sophie	Female	22	Research master – year 2	3/8	57:59	NA
Charlotte	Female	25	Bachelor – year 3	6/8	37:30	37:17
Amy	Female	25	Research master – year 2	6/8	47:25	34:53

Data analysis

All 19 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Code lists were developed independently by us based on relevant theories and readings of the interviews. Then, we discussed the codes and harmonised into a single list. All transcripts were then entered in ATLAS.ti version 7.1.6 and coded independently following the unified code list. During this procedure, a few new codes were added. Subsequently, summaries were made for each code, and we discussed their highlights, and enquired into possible differences in their understanding. In order to improve the reliability of the analysis, the psychologist and three international students were contacted again. After they read the draft article, interviews were arranged to cross-check the data, the interpretations and the conclusions drawn. It is also important to note that the first author who conducted all student interviews and observed the sessions participated in a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme and has been a regular mindfulness practitioner for the past five years.

Results

The findings of the study are presented here, with a focus on the factors that motivated international students to participate in a mindfulness programme, and their perceived outcomes. The findings on motivations are based on the first interviews, whereas the perceived outcomes are based on the second interviews. Since this article focuses on international students, we have excluded Eliza (the Dutch student) from our analysis.

Student motivations

Most of the students joined the mindfulness programme on their own; in two cases only, they were advised by a student psychologist. None of them had joined a full mindfulness programme earlier, yet seven students had some experiences with meditation, body scan and yoga. James was the only one regularly meditating at the start of the programme. Consequently, although most students had some affinity with mindfulness, as they had read about it, and heard about it from others or the media, they felt their understanding was patchy and incomplete.

Some students joined the programme with heightened expectations, hoping that the mindfulness programme would be a cure for some of their most debilitating problems, whereas for a few others the main drive was sheer curiosity and a desire to embark on a new experience. In this regard, Benjamin remarked: "I expect a lot and at the same time I expect nothing. Just being myself". The main motivations of students for joining the programme were as follows:

Managing stress, study pressures and uncertainties about the future

Stress, pressures of their studies, uncertainties about the future and the need to make some important life choices were at the core of students' motivations in almost all interviews. In our sample, except for one bachelor's student, all of the students were completing their degree programmes. Hence, they were at an important transition period in their lives. There was a general sense that their lives were "pretty stressful", and they were rushing from one deadline to another. Both their studies and prospective job search period all seemed taxing. Several students remarked how they would obsess about their performance in their studies, thinking anxiously about what will happen, and the choices they would be required to make. David left a good career, house and friends in his home country to join the master's programme and make a career shift. This implied not only major life changes and a sense of feeling "shell-shocked" for several months, but also financial insecurities. Amy did not have to worry about her bank account but had heightened academic pressures because her scholarship was tied to a high academic average.

The psychologist, who had many years of counselling experience with international students, argued that studying abroad generated additional stressors and challenges. According to her, international students are a particularly vulnerable group, have a pressing need for grounding, and are more susceptible to depression and other stress-related problems. Some of the students also confirmed these accounts. For instance, Amy commented that international students are more pre-disposed to anxiety, depression and rumination. Both Hannah and David agreed, unambiguously adding: "There is no doubt" about it. Such experiences of prolonged stress motivated students to join the mindfulness programme. They hoped that it would reduce their stress levels, help them feel grounded, develop skills, and regain a sense of confidence in meeting the demands of their hectic lives.

Developing self-awareness, particularly about needs and future aspirations

Mindfulness was also closely associated with improved awareness about the self, about thoughts, emotions and needs. In that sense, the mindfulness programme promised new techniques for self-discovery and improved understanding about one's inner world:

I portray a certain image towards everyone and I guess I am so busy with that, that I am not really focusing on what I want. I guess that is also the reason why I would like to do mindfulness ... to know what I actually want, and not being like an autopilot trying to maintain that image and pleasing everyone except for myself. (Benjamin)

Likewise, Hannah pointed out her desire to understand her needs better and to get in touch with her emotions rather than opting for strategies to suppress them: "I want to be more aware of what I need. I think I am quite aware of my immediate needs but not the long-term needs". Gaining greater awareness about their needs, desires and aspirations was particularly crucial for them, because these students were in an important transition period in their lives. Sophie, for instance, explained that she found it hard to decide about her future plans; hence, she had joined the programme to get some insights.

Learning to better regulate difficult emotions

Almost all students remarked their difficulty with having emotions they defined as "difficult" or "negative". Anger, anxiety, worry, sadness, loneliness, a sense of feeling overwhelmed, and feelings of rejection were cited as most difficult emotions they were experiencing at the time of this research. Talking to friends or family was an important coping mechanism, yet several students also noted that their strategies were not necessarily effective. These included denial and suppression of feelings, escaping them through activities and keeping busy (e.g. work, watching TV, sports), and excessive use of alcohol. Students noted that through mindfulness, they wanted to improve their awareness of negative emotions and deal with them more effectively.

Releasing negative thought patterns and rumination

Students also discussed their tendency to overthink about what had happened in the past and what might happen in the future. The content of their recurrent thoughts was related not only to their life trajectories (e.g. further study and career choices) but also to their romantic entanglements. Julia reaffirmed her wish to cultivate a peaceful mind after a relatively long period of depression, while Benjamin wanted to stop getting lost in his thoughts. Depressive episodes, melancholy, self-blaming, and remorse about certain decisions and experiences were brought up by others. Mindfulness appeared to offer tools to leave the past behind, and to shift their thoughts from having a negative undertone to more positive ones.

Cultivating self-compassion

Some students also explicitly noted that they wanted to learn to be more self-compassionate, due to concerns that they were unfairly harsh and placed very high expectations on themselves. They tended to feel more compassion towards others, but self-compassion was more difficult to practice.

According to Hannah, this had to do with how girls were raised to care and feel responsible for the wellbeing of others, while doing the same for the self was associated with self-centeredness and egoism. Students made several remarks with a solemn expression indicating that their relationship with their own self was not always a happy one. For Benjamin, the most interesting aspect of mindfulness was learning to be non-judgemental towards the self and others.

Learning to be more present

The majority of the students complained about a tendency to live in the past and in the future. Several of them noted that this was because of multiple demands on their agenda and various stresses they were exposed to. Hence, they were “missing the moment”, and not really enjoying their youthfulness, studies, and life in general. Sarah talked about her strong orientation towards the future, and tendency to plan things in advance. She wanted to learn more about living here and now, and wished to be more oriented towards the present moment. Benjamin shared these sentiments, and expressed his desire to live in the now, commenting solemnly, “I am not really here”. Students associated an improved sense of presence and living in the now with a sense of aliveness, slowing down, relaxation and joy.

Perceived outcomes of the mindfulness programme

All international students reported that the mindfulness programme either met their expectations or exceeded them. Amy said: “I really enjoyed it!” and David noted:

It exceeded my expectations, to be honest ... [the psychologist] was an incredibly enthusiastic teacher, and conveyed the concepts in a simple way for us. And, there was a good mix between the practice and the theory.

The positive outcomes entailed a wide range of aspects including enhanced self-awareness, better emotion and thought regulation, and increased self-compassion and compassion towards others. Before we elaborate on these aspects, it is important to note that only David did the homework assignments regularly on a daily basis (including 10 min of guided meditation and a body scan on a daily basis). Five students (Charlotte, Sarah, Hannah, James and Benjamin) practiced the mindfulness exercises “quite regularly”, but not on a daily basis. Body scanning was the most popular practice because it was easy and enabled falling asleep quickly, while meditation was viewed as the most difficult and challenging practice. Sophie and Amy indicated that they had trouble incorporating mindfulness into their daily life, and did not manage to practice regularly. Unlike the students in the study by Burrows (2016), no one reported adverse consequences.

Emotion and thought regulation

All international students reported improvements in their awareness levels with regard to their emotions and thoughts. They were also better able to relate to these thoughts and emotions, and to regulate the negative ones more constructively. Benjamin revealed that he developed greater awareness of his difficult emotions and learnt to “just be” with these emotions instead of trying to evade them. In the past, he used to feel discomfort with negative emotions and felt frightened. With mindfulness, he was becoming increasingly more compassionate and curious about his emotions:

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 do not have to push it away, it is part of me.

Charlotte echoed Benjamin’s nervousness with difficult emotions. She was learning to acknowledge her negative emotions more, but being with such emotions was still a little scary to her. Like Benjamin, she developed an attitude of being more compassionate, gentle and less judgemental. Hannah explained that meditation helped her stay with difficult emotions. She was gradually able to deal with her sense of unrest more effectively. James confirmed similar developments: for him it was key that

he could detect the arising of negative thoughts at early stages, to have distance from them and not give in to the temptation to identify with them. Furthermore, when he felt “bad”, he allowed himself to feel bad. Learning not to judge feelings, allowing them, feeling them fully, and simply being with them were notable experiences.

Despite these positive accounts, half of the students reported that they would have liked more attention to emotion regulation, particularly in the initial weeks of the programme. David argued that when emotion regulation is not addressed adequately, it might lead to dropping-out from the programme: “Because it’s 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.” Hannah resonated with David’s view. She maintained that “There is a lot of trouble from the past ... How do you deal with negative emotions that would come up? It comes so late.”

Relating to the self

All international students experienced improvement in the way they treated themselves. They developed greater understanding of their inner worlds, experienced increased self-compassion, took better care of themselves, and appreciated their own achievements more. Moreover, they all reported diminished levels of self-criticism and judgement. In addition, Hannah maintained that mindfulness helped her gain more self-knowledge, which eventually led to more informed decisions and actions. Likewise, for Charlotte, this was an important gain:

I was just running around doing stuff that I thought I had to, like doing work, doing school ... without ever keeping in mind to take care of myself. And, mindfulness reminds you to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. What are you doing? What are you doing with your life?

Furthermore, students reported increased self-compassion. Hannah aspired to treat herself like she would treat a good friend. James and David each learnt to better appreciate their own selves and took pride in their own achievements. Similarly, Charlotte, Amy and Sarah recorded more compassionate and gentle attitudes towards their own selves. Sarah developed a conscious attitude about the times she was kind towards herself and the times she was not, and tried to cultivate self-compassion more intentionally.

Such improvements in self-compassion often resulted in improved self-care: Benjamin got a massage when he was experiencing tension in his body, Charlotte started eating more healthily, and Sarah improved her skin-care and went to the gym regularly. She experienced visible improvements in her appearance and felt rather pleased. To her, there was a clear, mutually reinforcing relationship between mindfulness and self-care. Moreover, all students mentioned judgemental attitudes towards the self as an incapacitating problem, and all international students noticed improvement in this regard. With the help of mindfulness, they were less critical of themselves and learnt to disidentify with their inner judge. For James, some self-judgement was still persistent but he could tackle it better:

I would recognize judgement very quickly. I would say: “Yeah, you are judging yourself, and you are judging others ... Is it necessary? Or, is it helpful? And if not, then what can be better?” ... I did self-beating less and less. Instead I gave more encouragement.

Interpersonal relationships

Students reported being more caring and compassionate towards others. These improvements entailed a more understanding, gentle and polite attitude towards others, and more patience. Benjamin disclosed that he used to be more passive-aggressive but now he was recognising that, “I am dealing with something; they are probably dealing with something”. Charlotte started to give more compliments and made people feel better about themselves. For Sarah, learning to see things from others’ point of view was key. She also mentioned letting others “just be”, allowing them to do what they want to, and offering support for their choices. For David, listening to people without

commentary and advice was a powerful practice. Students argued that there was a clear relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others: improved self-compassion appeared to generate more compassionate attitudes towards others. Charlotte, for example, stated that after starting with mindfulness, she cared more about herself and more about others. She was also judging herself less, and this eventually meant less judgemental attitudes towards others. Furthermore, as Amy expressed, improved self-compassion and acceptance entailed less irritability with other people, and less projection of one's own negative thoughts, emotions or worries onto others.

Being more mindful and living in the now

Several students also underscored the desire to be more mindful and present with life, and how the programme was helping them in this regard. Being mindful entailed getting out of an autopilot mode, having a better perspective on life, and being present with whatever was unfolding here and now. Amy stated that her entire life seemed to be about studying. Yet, she was learning that when she was upset about a study-related matter, she could let it go. She was gradually getting out of the habit of "doing everything in a hurry" and being more present by slowing down to life. Likewise, Hannah reported feeling more mindful, but not "super mindful yet". She reported enjoying the evenings more as she took the time to be present, biking in the evening, taking deep breaths, looking around, simply observing.

Letting go and trusting life more

James reported that with the help of mindfulness he learnt to be more at peace with whatever was unfolding in his life:

I wanted to control everything in my life. I wanted to make plans very early so that I do not need to face anything accidental. But now, yeah, [I] trust in life more. Like, what happens is what needs to happen. So let it be ... It is a big change.

James's account pointed to a growing sense of peace with life even when his expectations were not met, and trusting that life brings other opportunities. Being at peace and letting go of the attachment to specific outcomes, places, things or persons were central to David's account as well. He argued that the teachings and the practices inspired him to develop an attitude of fearlessness in facing the hardships of life:

This whole exercise is not about positive thinking and visualising a successful life. It is about developing a way to react to the things that happen to you, whether they are good or bad ... The only thing in life you can control is your response to what happens to you. And, actually when you come to that knowledge, it is the most liberating thing in the whole world ... And that is what I think this course did most is that I feel a profound sense of peace and faith.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that international students experience multiple stresses and challenges in their lives. Academic pressures, relationship problems or making choices about the transition to the labour market or further programmes of study are comparable to what is experienced by domestic students (see Ghilardi, Buizza, Costa, & Teodori, 2017; Julal, 2013). However, as we found in our study, international students appear to be a particularly vulnerable group who experience additional pressures, making them perhaps more susceptible to depression, rumination and stress-related problems. By joining the mindfulness programme, they hoped to build resilience in the face of stresses, pressures to perform, and anxieties about their future, to cultivate self-awareness, to train their minds to better regulate their emotions and thoughts, and to be more present in their lives.

All international students reported positive outcomes and stated that the programme surpassed their expectations. They experienced improvements in self-awareness, self-care, and emotion and thought regulation. They maintained that they were more compassionate towards themselves and

others after the programme, and were more able to let go and trust life. These improvements appeared to have observable effects on their quality of life. The results indicate that mindfulness has considerable potential for improving wellbeing and mental health, thereby corroborating findings of some comparable studies with higher education students in Western countries (Conley et al., 2013; De Bruin et al., 2015; Shapiro et al., 2011). Moreover, our findings imply that mindfulness may particularly support international students who are in transition periods, through increased self-awareness about their needs, wishes and aspirations. As such, mindfulness may help them with making informed and wise choices. The findings also suggest that mindfulness programmes can contribute to international students' social and cultural adaptation in host societies, their coping with stress and major change, and handling uncertainties in their lives. When universities emphasise that international students need to "adjust" or "adapt" more effectively, all responsibility and agency is placed on students (Sherry et al., 2010). However, universities as institutional environments have important responsibilities in offering support services to international students to ease their social and academic integration. Within this framework, mindfulness programmes offer an important policy measure at relatively minimal costs (Conley et al., 2013), and can be integrated into university counselling services.

In our study, more positive outcomes were reported by students who joined the weekly sessions repeatedly and who did homework practices more regularly. Indeed, "the degree to which students engage in home practice very much affects the impact of the course" (Weare, 2013, p. 7). Yet, encouraging homework practice without pressuring students and giving them the feeling that the mindfulness programme is yet another demand in their busy schedule remains a challenge. Furthermore, as various students noted, mindfulness needs to be incorporated into daily life after the programme in order for participants to benefit from its full potential. This remains one of the biggest challenges, since many participants do not continue with the practices in the long run on a regular basis (Rogers, 2013).

Another noteworthy finding in our research is that students reported overwhelmingly positive outcomes. However, similar to several other studies in the field, we looked into the immediate effects of the programme; hence, no conclusions can be drawn with regard to the sustainability of these results over time (Waters et al., 2015). For instance, to what extent are mindfulness skills retained, sustained or developed over time? (Dariotis et al., 2016). Moreover, it is not clear which aspects of mindfulness (e.g. meditation, gratitude journal, group sharing or body scan) are responsible for the results obtained. Further research can explore these issues with a longitudinal approach, and a larger sample to enhance the representativeness of the reported outcomes. Since our research is based on subjective accounts, it lacks the type of convergent evidence that can be obtained from peers, or through neurological measures. Moreover, the small sample size and the reliance on qualitative data analysis may limit generalisability to all international students. Future studies can explore strategies to triangulate the subjective evidence, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Hülya Kosar Altinyelken is an assistant professor in the Child Development and Education Department of the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her research interests cover a wide range of issues, including mindfulness in education, citizenship, and identity development and social integration among Muslim youth in the Netherlands.

Lianne Hoek completed the research master's programme in Child Development and Education at the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She now works as a teacher and research assistant in the Department of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam. Her main research interests focus on social outcomes of education and citizenship education.

Lina Jiang is a PhD candidate in the Department of Child Development and Education, the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her research is concerned with internationalisation of higher education, with a focus on Chinese tertiary-level students' experiences in academic and social integration in the Netherlands.

ORCID

Hülya Kosar Altinyelken  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2178-0862>

Lianne Hoek  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9618-1824>

References

- Albrecht, N. J., Albrecht, P. M., & Cohen, M. (2012). Mindfully teaching in the classroom: A literature review. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(12), 1–14.
- Bamber, M. D., & Schneider, J. K. (2016). Mindfulness-based meditation to decrease stress and anxiety in college students: A narrative synthesis of the research. *Educational Research Review*, 18, 1–32.
- Bihari, J. L. N., & Mullan, E. G. (2012). Relating mindfully: A qualitative exploration of changes in relationships through mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. *Mindfulness*, 5(1), 46–59.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Broderick, P. C., & Frank, J. L. (2014). Learning to BREATHE: An intervention to foster mindfulness in adolescence. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2014(142), 31–44.
- Brown, J., & Brown, L. (2013). The international student sojourn, identity conflict and threats to well-being. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 41(4), 395–413.
- Burrows, L. (2016). Safeguarding mindfulness meditation for vulnerable college students. *Mindfulness*, 7, 284–285.
- Bush, M. (2011). Mindfulness in higher education. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), 183–197.
- Conley, S. S., Durlak, J. A., & Dickson, D. A. (2013). An evaluative review of outcome research on universal mental health promotion and prevention programs for higher education students. *Journal of American College Health*, 61(5), 286–301.
- Dariotis, J. K., Mirabal-Beltran, R., Cluxton-Keller, F., Gould, L. F., Greenberg, M. T., & Mendelson, T. (2016). A qualitative evaluation of student learning and skills use in a school-based mindfulness and yoga program. *Mindfulness*, 7(1), 76–89.
- De Bruin, E., Meppelink, R., & Bögels, S. (2015). Mindfulness in higher education: Awareness and attention in university students increase during and after participation in a mindfulness curriculum course. *Mindfulness*, 6(5), 1137–1142.
- De Witt, A. (2018). Transformative solutions for sustainable well-being. In S. Dhiman & J. Marques (Eds.), *Handbook of engaged sustainability. Contemporary trends and future prospects* (pp. 139–168). New York: Springer.
- Ergas, O. (2018). Schooled in our own minds: Mind-wandering and mindfulness in the makings of the curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50(1), 77–95.
- Ghilardi, A., Buizza, C., Costa, A., & Teodori, C. (2017). A follow-up study on students attending a university counselling service in Northern Italy. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*. doi:10.1080/03069885.2017.1391372
- Greenberg, M. T., & Harris, A. R. (2011). Nurturing mindfulness in children and youth: Current state of research. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 161–166.
- Hendrickson, B., Rosen, D., & Aune, R. K. (2011). An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(3), 281–295.
- Julal, F. S. (2013). Use of student support services among university students: Associations with problem-focused coping, experience of personal difficulty and psychological distress. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 41(4), 414–425.
- Jung, E., Hecht, M. L., & Wadsworth, B. C. (2007). The role of identity in international students' psychological well-being in the United States: A model of depression level, identity gaps, discrimination, and acculturation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 31(5), 605–624.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2015). Mindfulness. *Mindfulness*, 6(6), 1481–1483.
- Li, H. (2017). Academic integration of mainland Chinese students in Germany. *Social Inclusion*, 5(1), 80–92.
- Luzio-Lockett, A. (1998). The squeezing effect: The cross-cultural experience of international students. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 26(2), 209–223.
- Lynch, S., Gander, M., Nahar, A., Kohls, N., & Walach, H. (2018). Mindfulness-based coping with university life: A randomized wait-list controlled study. *Sage Open*, 8(1), 1–7.
- Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 78(2), 137–144.
- Nuffic. (2017). *Update: Incoming student mobility in Dutch higher education 2016-17*. Retrieved from <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/find-a-publication/update-incoming-student-mobility-in-dutch-higher-education-2016-17.pdf>

- O'Driscoll, M., Byrne, S., McGillicuddy, A., Lambert, S., & Sahm, L. J. (2017). The effects of mindfulness-based interventions for health and social care undergraduate students – a systematic review of the literature. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 22*(7), 851–865.
- Rogers, H. B. (2013). Koru: Teaching mindfulness to emerging adults. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2013*(134), 73–81.
- Russell, J., Rosenthal, D., & Thomson, G. (2010). The international student experience: Three styles of adaptation. *Higher Education, 60*(2), 235–249.
- Shapiro, S. L., Brown, K. W., & Astin, J. (2011). Toward the integration of meditation into higher education: A review of research evidence. *Teachers College Record, 113*(3), 493–528.
- Shapiro, S. L., & Izett, C. (2008). Cultivating empathy and self-compassion through mindfulness training. In S. Hick & T. Bien (Eds.), *Mindfulness and the therapeutic relationship* (pp. 161–175). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education, 60* (1), 33–46.
- Tarrasch, R. (2015). Mindfulness meditation training for graduate students in educational counseling and special education: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 24*(5), 1322–1333.
- Van Dam, N. T., van Vugt, M. K., Vago, D. R., Schmalzl, L., Saron, C. D., Olendzki, A., ... Meyer, D. E. (2018). Mind the hype: A critical evaluation and prescriptive agenda for research on mindfulness and meditation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 13*(1), 36–61.
- Waters, L., Barsky, A., Ridd, A., & Allen, K. (2015). Contemplative education: A systematic, evidence-based review of the effect of meditation interventions in schools. *Educational Psychology Review, 27*(1), 103–134.
- Weare, K. (2013). Developing mindfulness with children and young people: A review of the evidence and policy context. *Journal of Children's Services, 8*(2), 141–153.