THE MINDFULNESS FRAMEWORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND WHAT ACADEMICS (SHOULD) CARE FOR

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Abstract: Mindfulness, or the "mental state or attitude in which one focuses one's awareness on the present moment" (Oxford English Dictionary 2023), has often been advocated as an excellent instrument in schools to develop the students' learning potential and their ability to make sense of an increasingly complex society. However, relatively few studies have applied a mindfulness approach to the hectic working lives of academics and presented it as a way out of the stressful demands of management-driven quality parameters. The present study intends to explore the role played by a mindfulness approach in higher education to help academics cope with stressful work conditions and also enhance their focus, skills and sense of worth. On the basis of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a sample of British universities web pages, the meanings and implications of mindfulness in diverse academic contexts are investigated and conclusions are drawn in light of the managerial university agenda and the overwhelming ethos of academic productivity at all costs.

Keywords: academia; British universities; discourse analysis; mindfulness; web pages; well-being.

1. Introduction

"Universities are places like no other workplaces" (Fanghanel 2012: 2) and working in higher education has always represented a prestigious (if not privileged) way of earning one's living, by carrying out research, sharing and disseminating new ideas in classrooms and lecture halls, developing skills and advancing knowledge. Glamorous as it may appear, "it is also a place of exploitation, inequalities, inaccessibility, precarity, prejudice and abuse" (Boynton 2021: 9). The significant changes brought about by the neoliberal agenda have taken their toll on academia and resulted in endless assessment schemes on academic performance and productivity, hectic working hours, and a lurking sense of disempowerment due to the fracture between the leading principles of academic enquiry and the current requirements based on standards of "quality" aligning with a managerial and profit-driven agenda (Smith and Ulus 2020). Scholars have exposed the risks associated with the transfer of managerial practices to the university system and some have also advocated forms of discursive resistance such as public demonstrations and the open critique of quality assurance mechanisms in academia (Anderson 2008; Gill and Donahue 2016; see Caimotto and Zollo in this dossier for alternative responses to the managerial university agenda).

Faced with the pressure of productivity at all costs (even the cost of rushing research findings for a faster publication rate) and the additional burden of administrative duties, academics risk losing clarity of thinking and may show worrying symptoms of alienation and burnout. As a response to growing levels of stress, the value of self-care and mindfulness as a daily practice can be seen to restore the calm thinking and deep sense of belonging that ensure quality teaching and research for busy academics. Mindfulness has often been advocated as an excellent instrument in schools to develop the students' learning potential and their ability to make sense of the increasingly complex society in which we are living (De Simone 2016; Langer and Moldoveanu 2000 among many others), but relatively few studies have explored its potential for university teachers and researchers (see Emerson *et al.* 2017; Lemon and McDonough 2018).

This paper sets out to review the mindfulness discourses in British universities and explore the manifest and implicit meanings associated with this practice increasingly spreading in educational settings. A sample of university web pages focused on a wide range of mindfulness-related events and resources has been analysed to answer my main research questions: 1. what does mindfulness in academia refer to exactly? and 2. to what extent can a mindfulness approach be regarded as beneficial and empowering by hard-pressed academics?

After introducing the concept of mindfulness and how it has evolved from its Buddhist roots into a popular therapeutic treatment in the Western world, I analyse the web pages' main themes and top-frequency words, with particular regard to verbal processes and noun phrases. On the basis of the most recurrent language patterns, attention is focused on two forms of classification, definitions and naming (Hodge and Kress 1993), as well as on the verbal processes, which shed light on agency and the dynamics of empowerment and control at university

(i.e., what mindfulness training is supposed to do and what role is played by university staff). The conclusions draw attention to the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings attached to mindfulness at university and problematize its beneficial value in light of the current trend towards academic entrepreneurship (see Siegel and Wright 2015).

2. Views of mindfulness

The two definitions of mindfulness provided by the Oxford English Dictionary testify to the semantic evolution of this word from its first meaning dating back to 1538, "The quality or state of being conscious or aware of something; attention" to its modern sense first recorded in 1889 and testifying to the British discovery of Buddhism and mindfulness as one of its leading principles:

> A mental state or attitude in which one focuses one's awareness on the present moment while also being conscious of, and attentive to, this awareness. Also: the cultivation and practice of this, esp. as a therapeutic technique. […] Frequently and originally with reference to Yoga philosophy and Buddhism […], but from the late 20th cent. increasingly taught and practised outside these contexts as a formal discipline, often involving meditation with a focus on, or acknowledgement of, one's emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations (Oxford English Dictionary 2023).

Buddhism was introduced to Great Britain, and the Western world at large by Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843-1922), a distinguished scholar and founder of the Pali Text Society (see Ridding and Maung Tin 1923 for a thorough review of the early studies of Pali and Buddhist sacred texts in Europe). Because Buddhist ethics with its asceticism and all-encompassing benevolence appeared out of touch with individualistic and profit-driven Western societies, its influence was gradual and initially limited to circles of open-minded thinkers captivated by the idea of universal harmony, spiritual enlightenment and human oneness in nature (Cook 2021).

The shift from the religious-philosophical framework to a scientific paradigm took place relatively recently in the nineties, due to the remarkable success of the mindfulness-based stress reduction programme used by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center to treat people showing severe chronic pain, anxiety and depression (Kabat-Zinn 1982; Kabat-Zinn *et al.* 1985). By documenting the positive results of mindfulness and meditation on his patients, and especially by deliberately removing references to the philosophical and ethical aspects of its Buddhist roots, Kabat-Zinn made it possible for this programme to be regarded as an unconventional but well-founded expression of the scientific approach, endorsed by other medical centres and investigated in a remarkably high number of research articles[1] (Booth 2017; Brazier 2018; Stanley, *et al.* 2018). In this scientific reframing, mindfulness was increasingly

[1] My search of the Scopus database from 1916 to 2023 has retrieved almost 30,000 mindfulness-related publications, the vast majority of which are concentrated in the last decade (precisely 25,592 from 2013 to 2023).

associated with "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment"[2] (Kabat-Zinn 2003: 145).

In line with the advance of marketization in a commodity-driven society, mindfulness has been further adapted from a healing practice for mentally ill patients into a self-help technique for people wishing to restore their balance and peace of mind, thanks to free or paid apps such as Buddhify[3]. The commodification of this complex construct that blends religious, philosophical and scientific threads has been severely criticised as a form of cultural imperialism, disrupting and contaminating Buddhist meditation into a McMindfulness scenario (Hyland 2015; Purser and Loy 2013). For this reason, it seems all the more important to consider the original meaning of mindfulness in its Buddhist roots, also bearing in mind the complexity of this concept and the different interpretations given across different domains[4] (Nisson and Kazemi 2016).

Although mindfulness is central in Buddha's teachings as one of the doorways to enlightenment, it is not defined explicitly but only through the description of its virtuous manifestations (Gethin 2015). According to the early collections of Buddha's discourses, right mindfulness is defined as the tranquil observation and contemplation of human life within a frame of mind liberated from greed, delusion and sorrow:

> And what, monks, is right mindfulness? Here, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings... contemplating mind in mind… contemplating phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This is called right mindfulness (cit. in Bodhi 2011: 20).

Becoming aware of the insubstantiality and subjectivity of human knowledge, choosing to focus on what is fundamental (as opposed to what is ephemeral), and directing one's attention with equanimity to what is really worth is the essence of mindfulness, a continuous state rather than a fleeting moment, as essential and natural for humans as breathing: "The aim is surely not simply the ability to pay attention; attention is a means to learning, and the Buddha is looking for such learning as it becomes part of one's blood and bones" (Brazier 2018: 62).

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[2] It seems worth pointing out that definitions of mindfulness often vary depending on their functions and contexts. For example, John Kabat-Zinn (2019: 10) has also pointed to meditation as one of its essential elements: "mindfulness is not merely a good idea, or a nice philosophy, belief system, or catechism. It is a rigorous universally applicable meditation practice — universal because awareness itself could be seen as the final common pathway of our humanity, across all cultures."

[3] See Stanley *et al.* 2018 for an insightful, multifaceted account of the ethical foundations of mindfulness coupled with an extensive review of how the mindfulness movement in the Western world has betrayed its Buddhist roots and hollowed out its layers of meanings.

[4] See Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) for an overview of the major developments of mindfulness applications across different domains since the late 1990s.

The contrast between the therapeutic adaptation of mindfulness and its original meaning within the Buddhist pathway is conveyed by the current labels of utilitarian vs. ethical mindfulness (Brazier 2018), and has originated a heated debate touching on the very essence of human identity torn between religion and secularism (Arat 2017). Even more interestingly, the debate on the ethical foundation of mindfulness has drawn attention to a further consequence of the current neoliberal agenda and its emphasis on subjectivity and individual responsibility (Türken 2017). In line with studies on the current ideology of social welfare and personhood (Gershon 2011; Gill 2008; Nafstad *et al.* 2007), it can be argued that the emphasis on personal mindfulness and the pursuit of one's own well-being also contributes to reducing political responsibility for the rampant distress in our societies by selling the story that people can manage to find the solution to severe systemic problems through an act of meditation (see Cook 2016; Davies 2015; Gill and Donahue 2016).

2.1. Great Britain as a "mindful nation"

Today the mindfulness movement is a global phenomenon rapidly spreading in Europe, the United States and Australia, but British society has proved sensitive to the appeal of mindfulness and meditation since the Victorian age and its discovery of Eastern civilizations, which resulted in the close interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology, philosophy and Buddhism (Cook 2021). It seems noteworthy that mindfulness is officially acknowledged and endorsed by the British Government through The Mindfulness Initiative[5] and the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group that was set up in 2014 in order to:

- review the scientific evidence and current best practice in mindfulness training
- develop policy recommendations for government, based on these findings
- provide a forum for discussion in Parliament for the role of mindfulness and its implementation in public policy (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2015).

Mindfulness has entered all areas of British society, from education to the national health service, from the criminal justice system to the workplace, in line with the key principles of a mindfulness-based agenda presented in the manifesto, *UK Mindful Nation* (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group 2015). The application of mindfulness in everyday life is wide-ranging and ever-growing as demonstrated by the wealth of resources available showcased on the British government website as well as blogs[6] and popular publications suggesting practical activities to combat stress and anxiety (e.g. Barnes 2023; Hennessey 2016). Despite a few cautious appraisals of its benefits – for example, at school where students may feel bored by a compulsory exercise in meditation (Weale

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[5] The significant impact of mindfulness-related projects in the UK can be appreciated in the regular updates on the official website http://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org/ (visited 15/01/2024).
[6] See https://www.gov.uk/guidance/wellbeing (visited 30/09/2023) and https://www.everyday-mindfulness.org/ (visited 30/09/2023).

2022) – mindfulness practice is generally presented as beneficial to everybody and in all kinds of environments, including the conflict-ridden political arena (Legget 2022; Simonsson of which 2023).

3. Materials and method

Since the Internet revolution, universities have increasingly relied on online media to establish their credentials and advertise their non-material goods: their web pages providing updated information to the public at large make their values and identity visible to all (Caiazzo 2013). In fact, web pages play an increasingly significant role in the decision-making process of potential students (Saichaie and Morphew 2014). Moreover, the university picture they convey appears to be comprehensive, up-to-date and reliable, and apt to be investigated through discourse analysis tools (Mautner 2005; Nasti *et al.* 2017) as an expression of institutional discourse and identity (Biber 2006).

The present study is based on the analysis of a sample of British university web pages featuring the word "mindfulness" in their titles and retrieved through an advanced Google search where the search query, "mindfulness", was limited to the academic domain, ac.uk, and to one year, from June 2022 to June 2023, in order to gather the most recent web pages. The URLs for the selected web pages were then used to build up a corpus through Sketch Engine, a software application for corpus building and text analysis[7] (Kilgariff *et al.* 2014). Although the corpus is small (based on 143 web pages of 52 universities for a total of 92,032 words), it can be considered a fair sample of the British universities most active in promoting mindfulness courses, and a good starting point for future research. Only a thorough examination of all UK university websites can uncover the extent to which mindfulness training is currently used to promote well-being in British universities.[8]

The quantitative analysis of the British university web pages has then been related to a much larger corpus, the English web corpus EnTenTen21[9], and integrated with the case study of a web page advertising mindfulness courses for students and staff at the University of Edinburgh. The quantitative and the qualitative analysis are both informed by a critical discourse analysis framework that regards language choices as reflective of the "orders of discourse" (Fairclough 1989: 28) and possibly revealing of ideological meanings and hidden agendas in communicative acts, whatever their setting, genre and goal (Hodge and Kress 1993). The analysis draws on the distinction between actionals, i.e., verbs of doing, and relationals, i.e., verbs establishing relations between nouns and other nouns or attributes. Other forms of classification such as definitions (e.g., "mindfulness is") and naming (e.g., "mindfulness chaplains" vs.

[7] http://www.sketchengine.eu (visited 08/03/2024).
[8] This simple follow-up step may hide an unexpected difficulty considering that the definition of a university in the UK is not straightforward and there may be a different count of British universities (108, 138 or 162) depending on the definition adopted (Tight 2011).
[9] enTenTen21 is an English corpus of texts collected from the Internet between October 2021 and January 2022 (52 billion words) and available for analysis through Sketch Engine.

"mindfulness practitioners") have also been analysed to check a) the explicit and implicit meanings associated with the mindfulness training practiced in university settings and b) the socio-professional identities of the people working with mindfulness as a field of study or as a healing practice.

3.1. An overview of the web pages

The web pages retrieved differ widely with regard to the role of mindfulness in academia, whether as part of the teaching (e.g., degree programmes; curricular courses for undergraduates and postgraduates), research (press releases; funded projects; publication synopses) or services (resources; training for staff and students; public events). As can be seen in Figure 1, the majority of the web pages (n. 71 exactly) feature mindfulness-related resources, meant for the general public (n. 44), explicitly directed at students (n. 22) or staff (n. 5). Research is also well represented with almost one-third of the total number of web pages focused on projects, experimental studies, and research findings. A smaller section of the corpus is about the curricular courses and degree programmes (n. 23), whose details (school or department; credits; duration; learning outcomes; assessment etc.) give an idea of the variety of mindfulness-related studies in UK universities. The different topics also account for the varying length of the web pages, ranging from the abstract of a research project (163 words) to the prospectus of a mindfulness-related degree course packed with information (4,692 words). Regardless of their different topics and length, all the web pages have an informative and promotional function (Garzone 2019; Santini 2007), and typically foreground some attractive features of the university.
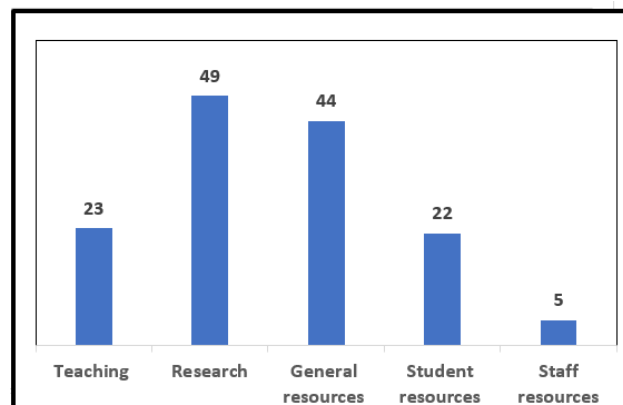

Figure 1. The number of mindfulness-related web pages according to their main themes.

The many functions associated with mindfulness across the university web pages analysed are a valuable indicator of its significant presence and diversified positioning in higher education, cutting across medicine, health, spirituality, education and work management. The general resources appear wide-ranging, as they include fact sheets on the history and benefits of mindfulness; invitations to public events open to all; students' or staff's blog entries on their mindfulness experiences; suggested breathing and meditation exercises made available as podcasts or videos. Additionally, other resources such as practical mindfulness

sessions are specifically tailored to students (n. 22) and, to a lesser extent, to staff (n. 5), in line with a university model as a client-oriented business where the pervasive concern for students' academic (under)performance can often come very close to a form of "customer care" (Scott 1999).

4. Quantitative analysis

Not surprisingly, the most frequent lexical item in the corpus is *mindfulness* followed, at a great distance, by *course, practice* and *research*, which point to the three most relevant dimensions of mindfulness at university: educational (*course*); health-oriented (*practice*) and epistemological (*research*). It also seems noteworthy that the large majority of the 30 highest-frequency words are grammatical. In particular, many of the items in Table 1 – *you, that, this, your, we, our* – have an indexical value as they refer to the here and now of face-to-face communication, typical of many web pages with their conversational style and also in line with the mindful focus on "the present moment".

Table 1. The top 30 words with their absolute and relative frequencies.

Rank	Word	Frequency	Frequency per Thousand
1	the	4,060	44,12
2	and	3,668	39,86
3	to	3,06o	33,25
4	of	2,758	29,97
5	a	1,883	20,46
6	in	1,785	19,40
7	mindfulness	1,716	18,65
8	is	1,064	11,56
9	for	1,037	11,27
10	you	1,033	11,22
11	that	794	8,63
12	with	764	8,30
13	this	762	8,28
14	on	700	7,61
15	as	689	7,49
16	are	654	7,11
17	be	610	6,63
18	your	608	6,61

19	it	594	6,45
20	we	575	6,25
21	or	530	5,76
22	can	518	5,63
23	our	459	4,99
24	at	438	4,76
25	by	419	4,55
26	course	419	4,55
27	will	404	4,39
28	practice	369	4,01
29	from	356	3,87
30	research	355	3,86

4.1. Verbal processes

Thanks to the Sketch Engine corpus query tool, it was possible to retrieve all the occurrences where *mindfulness* is either the subject or the object of the sentence, and examine its typical verbal processes. As shown in the examples below[10], *mindfulness* has a highly positive semantic prosody; in other words, the favourable connotations of *mindfulness* extend to the verbal processes associated with it:

- mindfulness *appears* to be better than doing nothing for improving our mental health
- mindfulness *becomes* a shared social practice in an organization
- mindfulness *has* high levels of acceptability among teachers and students
- mindfulness *helps* us tune into ourselves
- mindfulness *improves* the mental resilience of teenagers
- mindfulness *increases* prosocial behaviour
- mindfulness *involves* being present
- mindfulness *is* better than other feel-good practices
- mindfulness *reduces* anxiety, depression and stress
- how mindfulness *works.*

[10] Only the verbs with at least three co-occurrences with *mindfulness* as subject were included in this list. The salient words in these examples and the following ones are shown in italics.

Table 2. Frequency of *Mindfulness + Verb*[11]

MINDFULNESS + VERB	Frequency
Mindfulness is	100
Mindfulness helps	52
Mindfulness improves	16
Mindfulness works	11
Mindfulness reduces	10
Mindfulness has	9
Mindfulness becomes	7
Mindfulness involves	7

The most frequent verb associated with *mindfulness* is the linking verb *be* with the effect that *mindfulness* is characterized according to its properties rather than what it does. In fact, one of the most interesting patterns retrieved in the corpus is the definitional one, "mindfulness is ...." with a variety of definitions couched in medical, spiritual or sociological terminology:

1. Mindfulness is *a state of being* that is cultivated through regular practice and guidance
2. Mindfulness is *the awareness* that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment.
3. Mindfulness is an *integrative, mind-body based approach* that helps people to manage their thoughts and feelings.
4. Mindfulness is *a technique* with Buddhist origins which develops self-awareness by focusing on your body and actions at the present moment.
5. Mindfulness is a *non-religious mental exercise* that you can carry to every part of your life.
6. Mindfulness is *a simple and powerful practice* of training our attention.
7. Mindfulness is *the practice* of noticing your experience of the present moment with full awareness.
8. Mindfulness is *a secular practice* that help us to - be present in each moment - give attention to our thoughts, feelings and sensations - learn to work gently and positively with our self-critical voice.
9. Mindfulness is a *skill* that can be learnt and practised.
10. Mindfulness is the *basic human ability* to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.
11. Mindfulness is an *innate capacity of the mind* to be aware of the present moment in a non-judgemental way.
12. Mindfulness is an *evidence-based, secular and effective means* of alleviating stress, anxiety and depression, and promoting well-being, flourishing, and resilience.

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[11] It can be interesting to note how the most recurrent patterns are distributed in the corpus: "mindfulness is" and "mindfuness helps" occur across 22 universities and "mindfulness improves" across four universities.

13. Mindfulness is *a type of meditation* in which you focus on being purposefully aware of what you're sensing and feeling moment-by-moment, whilst bringing an attitude of kindness and curiosity to what you notice.

The definitions provided across the web pages foreground different aspects that may, to some extent, be in contrast with each other: a state; an approach; a technique; a practice; a skill; an ability/ capacity; a tool; a type of meditation. Some emphasize the dedication required by this practice/exercise/technique (definitions 1, 5, 6, 7, 9); some highlight its beneficial effects in terms of (self-) awareness, inner harmony and positive thinking (definitions 2, 3, 4, 8, 12, 13); others present mindfulness as something natural and intrinsic to human nature (definitions 10 and 11). Other controversial aspects emerging from these definitions concern the secular-religious polarity (definitions 5, 8, 12 vs. definition 4 which alone acknowledges the Buddhist tradition); and the fleeting moment vs. ongoing state dichotomy, which is still a divisive issue in Buddhist scholarship (definitions 2, 4, 7, 11 vs. definition 1). Even from this survey of popular definitions addressing the Internet audience, it is easy to infer the complexity of this concept, as it has evolved from its ancient Eastern roots and the eightfold Buddhist pathway into the perfect solution to the stress and anxiety plaguing the modern way of life. As stated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011: 22), "The word 'mindfulness' is itself so vague and elastic that it serves almost as a cypher into which we can read virtually anything we want."

When mindfulness is the object in the sentence, the mindfulness-driven actions project a positive aura in a variety of contexts; from the educational setting to the hustle and bustle of daily life and the workplace, the positive effects of mindfulness and its simple procedural steps are repeatedly foregrounded:

- *Apply* mindfulness to address stress and anxiety in an educational setting.
- you will learn ways to *bring* mindfulness & awareness into the everyday activities of life.
- Through *cultivating* mindfulness, the Exeter Mindfulness Centre has the intention to reduce human suffering, promote well-being and create the conditions in which people can flourish.
- The universities of Oxford and Exeter are assessing how best to train teachers to *deliver* mindfulness to their students
- And we often *explain* mindfulness by describing its opposite: mindlessness.
- Come together with colleagues from across the University and *explore* mindfulness in the workplace.
- The universal processes that we all cultivate as we practice and *integrate* mindfulness within our lives are awareness and compassion
- You can *practice* mindfulness anywhere - on your own, through group sessions or one-to-one.
- As well as *studying* mindfulness, you'll also practice it.
- This eight-week course *teaches* mindfulness to help you manage stress, low mood and other challenges
- To date, businesses *use* mindfulness to improve productivity, and for better mental health

It also seems worth noting that all the verbal processes, whatever their situational contexts (daily life; university; workplace), relate to the semantic field of education, even when the web pages feature mindfulness as a resource for increasing profit: verbs such as *apply, bring, cultivate, explain, explore, integrate, practice, study teach* connote the growth mindset typical of healthy educational settings while only some of them (e.g., *deliver; use*) are also loaded with utilitarian connotations. This finding seems in line with the ambivalent status of *mindfulness*, regarded either as an end in itself or as an instrument to achieve something else (well-being, success, profit etc.).

The verbal processes are mostly associated with the deictics *we* and *you*, referring respectively to the university staff and the mindfulness recruits, as can be inferred from the extended cotext. The use of these dialogic pronouns levels out the differences in role between university staff and students and make both groups appear equal in their concrete effort to improve their own and others' well-being through mindfulness:

- At Sussex Mindfulness Centre we aim to improve wellbeing through mindfulness. We bring together mindfulness practice, research and training.
- You will consider how mindfulness informed approaches to well-being might enhance personal, organisational and wider community ways of being in the 21st Century.

4.2. Noun phrases

A look at the modifiers of *mindfulness* shows new interesting professional figures (Table 3), besides more conventional ones featuring the word "professor" (for example, Professor of Mindfulness and Psychological Science). Compared to the masters of Buddhism, interested in developing wisdom and compassion in their followers, the mindfulness professionals working at university have a variety of backgrounds, competences and agendas, as can be inferred from the examples below:

- If you wish to discuss whether the course is suitable for you currently, please contact the *Mindfulness Chaplain*
- Guided by *mindfulness experts*, you'll use reflective journaling throughout this course
- We aim to run courses frequently throughout the year - led by trained clinical psychologists and *mindfulness instructors*
- The course offers an opportunity for in-depth learning and aims to foster a community of *mindfulness practitioners and teachers* with the expertise to deliver high-quality MBCT [Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy] in a variety of settings, including healthcare, education, criminal justice, government, and others
- You can choose from "on demand" videos, to show yourself, or book a live session from one of our *Mindfulness Trainers*.

Besides the *experts*, a vague and all-encompassing category identified by their procedural and theoretical knowledge, the majority of mindfulness professionals are teachers, trainers, instructors and practitioners, half-way between health care and education (Woods 2009). Given the association of *chaplain* with Christian worship, it seems worth noticing the surprising collocation *mindfulness chaplain*, which seems to point to a more inclusive view of religion, as emphasized in the banner of the university of Edinburgh website: "Multi-faith and belief chaplaincy, for all faiths and none".

Table 3. Frequency of the noun phrases denoting mindfulness professionals.

Noun phrase		Frequency
MINDFULNESS	chaplain	6
	experts	2
	instructor(s)	3
	practitioner(s)	12
	teacher(s)	28
	trainer(s)	3

4.3. Naming

In contrast to the vast array of resources tailored for students, the resources meant for staff are few and far between, as noted in section 3. This partiality for students' well-being can be easily explained as part and parcel of the university system where students are the principal targets of educational activities and services. Nevertheless, it seems perplexing that only a few universities explicitly offer well-being and mindfulness services also to staff when the concern over the alarming levels of stress at university is widespread and exposed by media (Morrish 2017 and 2019). If the way of classifying people and objects is a strong indicator of ideology, naming people working at university *staff* or *employees* rather than *academics, scholars* or *researchers* may belittle their specialized knowledge and expertise and ultimately equate them with the workforce of any company or profit-oriented business (see Grego on this dossier for some case studies of university employees' well-being). In fact, it seems worth noticing that the people working at university are mostly referred to by the generic word *staff* unless their research work is mentioned and in this case they are called *researchers*. Thus, a problematic incongruity can be perceived when people working at university are named: they are generically indicated as *staff* with reference to their teaching but they are called *researchers* when their publications are mentioned. Yet, for academic staff teaching and researching are (or should be) two sides of the same coin:[12]

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[12] See Dandridge 2023 for a clear-sighted account of the increasing separation of teaching and research activities in the UK higher education sector due to financial and policy pressures on universities.

University staff will guide you through six course modules with recordings of lectures and guided practices. You can engage with these at your own pace.

The researchers concluded that more research is needed but these initial findings suggest that mindfulness training had helped students at Bristol reduce anxiety, excessive worry, negative thought patterns.

Table 4. Frequency of the lexical items denoting the people working at university.

Lexical items	Frequency
Academics	6
Academic staff	2
Employees	9
Researchers	69
Staff	67

4.4. Mindfulness in the web corpus enTenTen21

As shown in Table 5, the verbs collocating with *mindfulness* in the general enTenTen21 corpus have positive connotations and suggest a developmental process: *allow, cultivate, develop, enable, exercise, help, improve, integrate practice, teach.* Even the ambivalent collocate *pay* turns out to have a positive meaning as it is systematically followed by *attention* as in the following concordances:

- Mindfulness is about paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and without judging
- True mindfulness is paying attention to the moment, the way your breath feels and the way your thoughts sound
- The art of mindfulness is paying attention to your reality in this moment in the right way

The developmental and self-empowering process associated with the verbs is further reinforced by the predicative adjectives such as *beneficial, effective, essential, helpful, important key, simple, useful,* etc. (see Figure 2). Even the adjective *difficult,* whose connotations may be less positive compared to the other collocates, points to the challenge as well as the rewards represented by mindfulness training:

- the reason mindfulness is difficult is that we have a habit of avoidance
- Mindfulness is difficult to swiftly summarise, but in the long-term, it improves self-understanding
- There's no need to make mindfulness difficult, uncomfortable or woo-woo.
- Mindfulness isn't difficult to learn. It just requires us to suspend skepticism and decide to make this tool a part of our life
- mindfulness is difficult because we're wired to be on auto-pilot

Thus, despite the critique of the Western version of mindfulness (or "McMindfulness") briefly illustrated in the introductory sections, the top

collocates of *mindfulness* in the general web corpus suggest that the common perception of this practice, therapy or way of life is generally positive.

Table 5. Verbs collocating with "mindfulness" as subject and object in enTenten21.

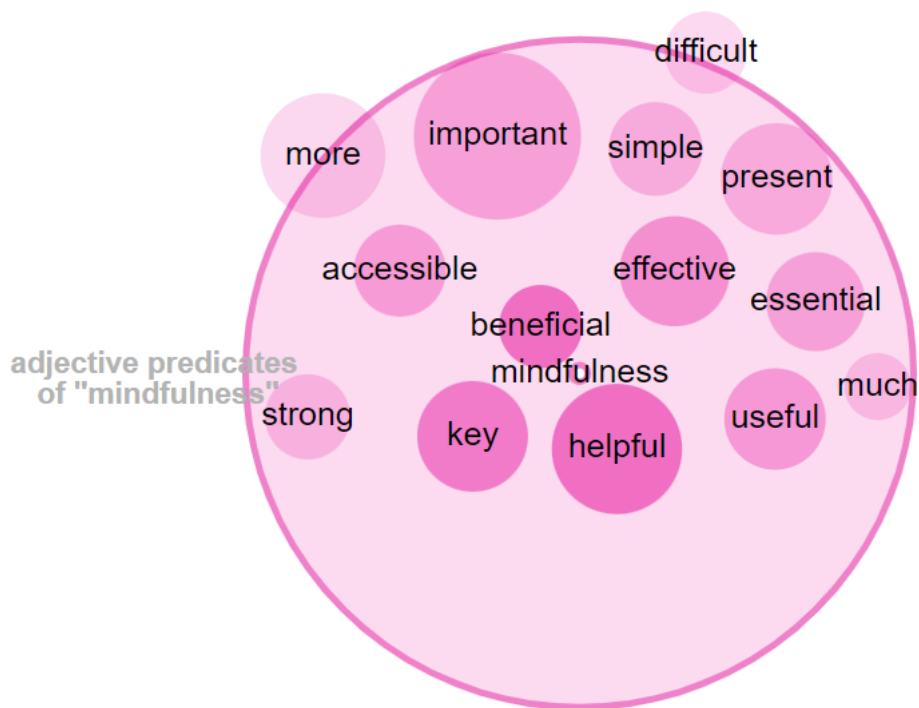| Verbs with "mindfulness" as subject	Verbs with "mindfulness" as object
help	practice
become	base
exercise	use
mean	teach
allow	bring
involve	practise
teach	develop
bring	cultivate
reduce	incorporate
improve	integrate
pay	increase
encourage	promote

Figure 2. Word sketch of the adjective predicates of *mindfulness* in enTenten21.

5. A case study: Mindfulness courses at the University of Edinburgh

The quantitative data have been related to the qualitative findings gathered through the analysis of the mindfulness web pages at the University of Edinburgh. As mentioned in the introduction, few university web pages focus on the well-being of academics (only 5 in this corpus). The University of Edinburgh was selected as a case study for its combined effort to cater to the students' and the staff's well-being within a spiritual framework.

The mindfulness courses at the University of Edinburgh are hosted in the section "Multi-faith and belief chaplaincy, for all faiths and none", pointing to a close link between spiritual and physical well-being. Two separate courses, one for students and one for staff and postgraduates, are advertised within the same web page. Although they are distinct, they use the same textual structure and almost the same language. Interestingly, the title of the course for staff and postgraduates differs from the course for students as it also includes compassion: "Mindfulness and Compassion Course for Staff and PGRs." Another substantial difference concerns the amount of the suggested donation, which is 35£ for students and 75£ for staff and postgraduate students, including the cost of the coursebook.

Underneath the details (location, starting date, timetable, course duration, suggested donation) and a brief introduction to the course, a dialogic text revolving around four open-ended questions in bold (reminiscent of frequently asked questions) foregrounds the main pieces of information from the perspective of a potential participant:

> What will I learn?
> How much time will I need to commit?
> What do previous participants say?
> Is this the right course and/or the right time for me to attend?

The use of the first-person pronoun makes this simulated dialogue more confidential and self-focused as if the participant had already started paying attention to their thoughts and doubts, in line with the mindfulness principles. The answers provided by a discreet but knowledgeable teacher reinstate the traditional dialogic structure between *you* and *we*:

> **What will I learn?**
> Mindfulness and compassion training consists of formal and informal practices, cognitive exercises, and psycho-education.
> Over five sessions, you will learn to steady your attention, recognise and work with unhelpful patterns of thought, <u>and orient mental habits towards presence and appreciation</u>. We will investigate the patterns of mind and behaviour that give rise to low mood and a sense of being 'stuck', and those that promote good mental health, wellbeing, and quality of life.[13]

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[13] I have underlined the clause "and orient mental habits towards presence and appreciation" as it differentiates the mindfulness and compassion course for staff and postgraduates from the mindfulness course for students, which does not mention this aspect.

In the shift from an introspective dialogue to a real-life exchange, the tasks and activities of each set of actors are clearly demarcated with *you* the learners ("you will learn to…") and *we* the researchers investigating patterns of mind and behaviour ("we will investigate…"). Yet, thanks to inclusive *we*, the investigation is made to appear as a joint endeavour whereby the course participants and the mindfulness practitioners use their different experiences and competence to mutually enrich each other's sense of awareness. Inclusiveness is emphasized at the very beginning of the course description, where the use of the reflexive pronoun *ourselves* conveys the idea that the benefits of mindfulness and compassion are meant for everybody, regardless of academic role:

> Mindfulness and compassion are well-researched and effective means of alleviating stress, anxiety, and depression, and promoting wellbeing and flourishing in ourselves and our relationships.

Although the personal motivations behind one's decision to attend mindfulness sessions are varied and pertain to the private sphere, the declared objectives of mindfulness training are common to students and staff:

- relieve stress, anxiety and depression
- promote well-being and flourishing

The reasons for stress, anxiety and depression may presumably not be the same for students and staff (e.g., examinations vs research assessment); likewise, the ways of well-being and flourishing that each group experiences is likely to be affected by their different age bands. Additionally, staff are also encouraged to show compassion, and develop an appreciative mindset in order to better respond to their pastoral care duties. However, all in all, an underlying commonality emerges from the Edinburgh web pages promoting mindfulness courses: students and staff alike can feel vulnerable and in need of moral and physical support.

6. Concluding remarks

The examination of a sample of UK university web pages related to mindfulness has shown an interesting variety of functions attached to mindfulness as a curricular course, degree programme, research project and resource, either meant for the general public or specifically tailored for students and, to a lesser extent, university teachers. The linguistic analysis has highlighted the highly positive semantic prosody attached to *mindfulness*, regardless of its subject or object position within the clause. Moreover, a close look at the recurrent definitional pattern "mindfulness is…." has shown multiple and mutually contradicting meanings associated with *mindfulness*: for example, an ongoing state versus the awareness of the present moment; secular versus religious practice; a skill as opposed to an innate ability. The analysis of the mindfulness modifiers has shown that the professionals in mindfulness training have to do

both with education and health care (e.g., teachers and practitioners), and a few (such as chaplains) point towards a more ecumenical outlook on the part of the Christian church. However, when it comes to the role played by university lecturers either promoting or benefiting from mindfulness training, they seem to undergo a painful split between their teaching and their researching selves.

The audit culture for higher education research and teaching is gaining ground in the United Kingdom, as well as in the rest of the world: we academics are asked to submit to obscure quality assurance processes that deep down may remind us of the rating method for poetry decried by Professor Keating in the 1989 film *Dead Poet's Society*. Despite the protests and the well-documented critique of the rampant managerialism invading the university, imposing profit-oriented assessment criteria and turning knowledge into a set of deliverable goods (i.e., research products), the academics' sense of alienation and fatigue may hardly be lightened by mindfulness sessions. As pointed out by many and using the eloquent words of a university professor, "In one sense, the system inherently pressurises people, while at the same time you're saying, 'chill out, relax, it's all fine'." (Shackle 2019). While mindfulness training can often result in a placebo effect rather than a real solution, academics, mindful of their own worth, endeavour to resist the looming pressure of endless deadlines and quality assessment reports and also re-align the university with a people-centred rather than a product-driven agenda.

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