



Mindfulness in Higher Education: Conceptual Perspectives for Self-Leadership and Optimism

F. Sehkar Fayda-Kinik
Istanbul Technical University, Turkey

Abstract

Mindfulness can be regarded as a significant factor in transforming the educational landscape in higher education institutions (HEIs) because its integration into educational settings can offer several benefits such as promoting emotion regulation, reducing stress and anxiety, and developing self-control, well-being, and resilience among students and faculty in HEIs. It can foster a more positive learning and work environment in HEIs by enhancing self-leadership and optimism in individuals. Therefore, this study aims to investigate mindfulness in HEIs concerning self-leadership and optimism in the existing literature. Designed as a conceptual exploration of the literature across multiple theoretical perspectives in mindfulness, self-leadership, and optimism in the context of HEIs, this study theoretically examined these concepts in the literature in terms of their definitions and relationships in the existing eligible sources. According to the synthesized results, mindfulness is a transformative factor in HEIs that addresses cognitive, emotional, and social aspects, which promotes comprehensive growth and well-being among students and faculty. Its integration enhances self-leadership skills by improving self-regulation, stress management, and emotional satisfaction among both students and faculty. Furthermore, mindfulness fosters optimism in individuals and contributes to a positive academic environment characterized by resilience and enhanced performance. Despite its benefits, the careful consideration of ethical, cultural, and developmental factors is essential in implementing mindfulness practices to ensure their effectiveness. With the support of policymakers and educational leaders, mindfulness can significantly enhance the quality of HEIs and create a thriving academic community.

Keywords: higher education; literature review; mindfulness; optimism; self-leadership

1. Introduction

Mindfulness is a key concept and tool for transforming educational settings in higher education institutions (HEIs). Students enrolled in HEIs and faculty members mainly carrying out teaching and researching tasks have been facing several challenges in workload, academic achievement, competition, self-development, etc. These challenges may lead to an increase in stress levels, negative changes in behaviors, and disorders in the emotion regulation of both students and faculty. In this respect, mindfulness can be utilized as a developmental strategy to deal with such challenges because it is an effective factor for

reducing stress and promoting emotion regulation, which contributes to a more positive learning environment (Lee et al., 2024; Tamburrino & Levine, 2024). Therefore, it is significant to investigate the concept of mindfulness and its outcomes in HEIs to benefit from its positive effects on students and faculty.

Mindfulness is the non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of the present moment with intentional attention (Dafopoulou et al., 2023; Jankowski, 2023), which is related to the well-being, mental health, emotion regulation, and performance of students and teaching staff in HEIs. There are several studies indicating the positive outcomes of mindfulness interventions and training on students (Barone et al., 2024; Bell et al., 2024; Hammill et al., 2023; O'Hare & Gemelli, 2023; Reangsing et al., 2023) and faculty (Rodríguez-Jiménez et al., 2022; Strickland et al., 2022).

Moreover, mindfulness influences the development of self-leadership and optimism, which are connected to behavior- and emotion-based outcomes in individuals and organizations. Self-leadership, the ability to regulate one's own behavior and mindset, is positively affected by mindful inputs (Chen & Zhang, 2022; Cook & Beffel, 2016; Furtner et al., 2018). Regarding optimism which is about positive expectations for the future (Marelich & Piercy, 2020; Theodorakopoulou et al., 2023), it is also positively influenced by the development of mindfulness in individuals (Hammill et al., 2023; Konrad et al., 2023; Lucero-Romero & Arias-Bolzmann, 2023; Vidal-Meliá et al., 2022).

Notably, the attempts to foster mindfulness in students and faculty facilitate to create a more positive learning and work environment in HEIs (Ergas & Hadar, 2021; Hammill et al., 2023; Irizarry, 2022; Jha, 2021; Vidal-Meliá et al., 2022) by enhancing self-leadership and optimism in individuals (Chen & Zhang, 2022; Cook & Beffel, 2016; Furtner et al., 2018; Hammill et al., 2023; Konrad et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aims to explore mindfulness in HEIs in relation to self-leadership and optimism in the existing literature.

2. Methodology

This research was designed as a conceptual exploration of the literature across multiple theoretical perspectives on mindfulness, self-leadership, and optimism within the context of HEIs (Jaakkola, 2020). In other words, the determined concepts were theoretically investigated in terms of their definitions and relationships in the existing eligible sources. Accordingly, an extensive literature review was conducted to ensure comprehensive coverage of the relevant studies.

Several steps were followed to theoretically investigate the key concepts. First, the databases were determined as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science to conduct the review because of their comprehensive coverage and accessibility in the field. Second, the key terms; namely, mindfulness, self-leadership, and optimism, were searched in different combinations to ensure a comprehensive review of the literature such as "mindfulness in HEIs", "self-leadership in education", "optimism in higher education", and "relationships between mindfulness, self-leadership, and optimism". These combinations were created as a search string with the use of Boolean operators to refine and expand the search process. Next, the eligible publications acquired from the databases were critically evaluated based on whether they addressed mindfulness, self-leadership, or optimism in educational settings. After the definitions and characteristics of the key terms were extracted depending upon their application within higher education, the interrelationships among these concepts were identified and synthesized from multiple studies. Finally, the results were contextualized to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1- How does mindfulness contribute to students and faculty in HEIs?

RQ2- How does mindfulness affect self-leadership in students and faculty in HEIs?

RQ3- How does mindfulness affect optimism in students and faculty in HEIs?

3. Results

The findings obtained from the eligible sources in the field were synthesized in accordance with the contribution of mindfulness to students and faculty (RQ1), the effect of mindfulness on self-leadership (RQ2) and optimism (RQ3) in students and faculty within HEIs.

3.1 Mindfulness in education

Mindfulness is a significant factor in transforming the educational landscape because it supports fostering comprehensive growth, moral progress, and interconnectivity (Singha, 2024; Xue, 2023). Rooted in Buddhist traditions, mindfulness is defined as a non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of the present moment with intentional attention, and it allows individuals to react with less impulsivity and greater flexibility (Dafopoulou et al., 2023; Jankowski, 2023; Smart, 2019; Tan & Martin, 2016). It is a generic skill with a broad scope of implementations applicable to the field of education such as improving communication, empathy, emotional development, physical and mental health, and enhancing learning and performance (Hassed, 2016). Therefore, mindfulness is a phenomenon that researchers specialized in educational sciences should focus on its outcomes in education.

Mindfulness in education has been a center of interest for researchers and practitioners in theory and practicality; consequently, its integration into educational settings is both supported and critiqued. Advocates of mindfulness-based interventions argued that mindfulness practices enhance individual and societal well-being because they can promote emotion regulation, reduce stress, and eventually foster a respectfully more positive learning environment (Lee et al., 2024; Tamburrino & Levine, 2024). Notably, positive associations are evident between mindfulness practice and well-being among both students and teaching staff in the existing literature, and mindfulness can enhance performance and overall educational outcomes (Kulandaïammal et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). However, critics highlighted the potential misalignment between the Buddhist ethics underlying mindfulness and the neoliberal ideologies prevalent in contemporary schooling, which suggest that the commodification and instrumentalization of mindfulness may undermine its broader potential for human growth and development (Lee et al., 2024). Despite the negative criticism, mindfulness can be a powerful tool for managing emotions and improving mental health, particularly in post-pandemic educational settings (Fu et al., 2023; Kim, 2022).

Mindfulness practices are significantly evident to have a constructive impact on students' mental well-being, social relationships, and cognitive capacities; thus, serving as a valuable instrument, mindfulness can advance comprehensive development in educational settings. In this respect, Jankowski (2023) detected that mindfulness-based interventions in school influence positively the overall well-being, emotion regulation, self-control, and resilience of both teachers and students. Moreover, Munk et al. (2022) indicated that the integration of mindfulness interventions within the classroom setting of elementary schools can result in notable enhancements in student behavior, and self-regulation skills, as well as various conditions related to mental health and overall wellness. Harris (2017) also supported that mindfulness activities in early childhood classrooms allow young children to be creative, live in the present moment, and develop positive attitudes for future success. In addition, mindfulness practices influence students cognitively and emotionally in favor of their

performance. Consistently, Calma-Birling and Gurung (2017) reported that mindfulness improves cognition, emotional balance, and well-being in clinical and non-clinical populations based on their study on the effects of a brief mindfulness intervention on quiz performance of undergraduate students, and it was revealed that students who practiced mindfulness performed better on quizzes than the control group.

Mindfulness supports the humanization of education by fostering reflection, empathy, and the development of mature, and compassionate educators who can positively influence their students (Soares et al., 2024). The successful growth of mindfulness in education can be attributed to the strategic promotion and support from policymakers and educational leaders, who leverage scientific validation to position mindfulness as a credible practice (Hemming & Arat, 2024). Nevertheless, it is necessary to critically evaluate its potential adverse effects and the need for context-specific considerations in its implementation (Lee et al., 2024). Ultimately, the impact of mindfulness on reshaping education by addressing both cognitive and socioemotional aspects is remarkable; however, its integration into educational settings necessitates careful consideration of ethical, cultural, and developmental factors to ensure its effective and ethical practices (Kulandaïammal et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024).

3.1.1 Mindfulness for university students

Mindfulness can be regarded as a significant tool for enhancing the well-being and academic performance of undergraduate students. It can decrease stress, anxiety, and depression, which can be common among university students, particularly during challenging periods like the COVID-19 pandemic (Barone et al., 2024; Reangsing et al., 2023). According to Reangsing et al. (2023), mindfulness-based interventions showed moderate improvements in anxiety and depression along with a small but notable reduction in stress; therefore, these kinds of interventions can be useful, due to their potential, as complementary treatments in mental health care for students. Furthermore, mindfulness is linked to the improvement in feedback literacy skills which are crucial for academic growth. As Bell et al. (2024) indicated, students with higher mindfulness skills tend to have better feedback literacy and lower stress levels; hence, the incorporation of mindfulness into academic settings supports student success and well-being. The effectiveness of mindfulness extends to enhancing cognitive processing and academic performance. For instance, mindfulness practices for focused attention and self-compassion integrated into undergraduate courses were demonstrated to improve attention, reduce reaction time interference, and enhance overall well-being and classroom performance (O'Hare & Gemelli, 2023). Additionally, mindfulness-based interventions can help students self-regulate their technology use and thereby increase their engagement and connection within the university environment (Hammill et al., 2023).

The benefits of mindfulness are not limited to mental health and academic performance in HEIs. It also improves quality of life. Dispositional mindfulness has been found to moderate the negative impact of stressors like the COVID-19 lockdown on students' psychological well-being, which emphasizes the protective role of mindfulness in maintaining quality of life during stressful times (Barone et al., 2024). Accordingly, the positive effects of mindfulness programs on the mental health of university students were detected as significant improvements in various psychological outcomes (González-Martín et al., 2023). Moreover, the students having engaged in mindfulness training reported enhanced resilience, decreased reactivity to stressors, and better coping mechanisms, which are crucial for navigating academic and personal challenges (Nardi et al., 2022). Online mindfulness interventions have also proven effective in reducing test anxiety, with increases in mindfulness correlating with decreases in anxiety levels, regardless of the intervention length (Priebe & Kurtz-Costes,

2022). Briefly, it is evident that there are sophisticated benefits of mindfulness for undergraduate students, which advocates for its broader implementation in HEIs to foster a more supportive and thriving academic environment.

3.1.2 Mindfulness for faculty

Mindfulness practices provide considerable benefits for faculty in HEIs because these practices can address various aspects of their personal and professional well-being. Similar to university students, mindfulness can reduce stress, enhance emotion regulation, improve focus and overall psychological well-being among instructors, and foster a more engaged and connected academic community. For instance, a pilot study involving body awareness training, including Hatha Yoga and Dance Movement Therapy, revealed significant stress reduction and increased well-being among participants; therefore, the embodied learning interventions have the potential to promote self-knowledge and emotion regulation (Rodríguez-Jiménez et al., 2022). Further, the use of technology in mindfulness practices, such as using cell phones to cultivate mindful attention, can help bridge the gap between digital engagement and meaningful interpersonal interactions because it can promote a more connected and present academic community (Hadar & Ergas, 2019). Additionally, mindfulness practices can help faculty manage the pressures of academic productivity, such as writing and publishing, by alleviating writer's block and associated emotional distress (Strickland et al., 2022). Pedagogically, mindfulness can also support social equity, diversity, and inclusion by encouraging faculty to incorporate mindful awareness in their teaching practices; thus, it can foster a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment in HEIs (Irizarry, 2022). Consequently, individual faculty members can benefit from mindfulness so that it can contribute to a more supportive and effective educational environment, which ultimately enhances the overall quality of HEIs (Ergas & Hadar, 2021).

Mindfulness can also play a significant role in fostering a positive work environment in HEIs because it is associated with reduced stress and burnout among faculty members and enhances various aspects of both personal and professional well-being, which is essential for sustaining a healthy work environment. Notably, as Jha (2021) defended, the faculty members having practiced mindfulness reported higher job satisfaction, increased affective commitment, and enhanced employee voice behavior, all of which contribute to a more supportive and collaborative workplace. Furthermore, mindfulness can significantly enhance the decision-making skills of faculty because of its improvement in cognition and emotion regulation, development of ethical behavior, and encouragement of a more compassionate and effective teaching environment. According to Parsons et al. (2020), mindfulness training can lead to the improvement in attentional capacities and better decision-making, which are essential for faculty who often face complex and high-stakes decisions in their roles. Moreover, mindfulness fosters resilience, which is linked to better academic performance and emotional competencies, and thereby contributes to a positive educational setting (Vidal-Meliá et al., 2022). Thus, mindfulness practices not only support the well-being and professional growth of faculty but also enhance the overall academic environment and promote a culture of well-being and excellence.

3.2 Mindfulness and self-leadership in higher education

Self-leadership can be conceptualized as the ability to regulate one's own behavior and mindset whereas mindfulness entails the state of being fully present and aware of one's reactions to situations (Chen & Zhang, 2022; Cook & Beffel, 2016; Furtner et al., 2018; King & Haar, 2017). Self-leadership involves maintaining motivation and fulfilling roles through behavior-oriented, natural reward, and constructive-thought-pattern strategies (Ugurluoglu et

al., 2015). Concerning mindfulness, self-leadership is positively related to the observing facet of mindfulness (Furtner et al., 2018). According to Chen and Zhang (2022), the mindful agency positively predicted self-leadership, and this relationship was partially mediated by the metacognitive ability. Furthermore, leader mindfulness has been linked to various positive leadership outcomes, such as leadership self-mastery and organizational transformation. For instance, mindfulness has also been shown to balance the relationship between emotional exhaustion and leadership behavior, particularly in reducing negative affect and enhancing perspective-taking (Walsh & Arnold, 2018). Moreover, mindfulness interventions have been found to significantly relate to leaders' well-being, relationships, and job performance, as well as followers' well-being and job performance (Zhou et al., 2023).

Mindfulness training has a significant impact on the self-leadership skills of both faculty and students in HEIs because it can enhance various aspects of their academic and personal lives. For students, mindfulness practices have been shown to improve self-regulation, which is crucial for maintaining focus and engagement in a digitally connected world where distractions are rampant (Hammill et al., 2023). Additionally, mindfulness training has been linked to improved stress regulation and emotional satisfaction among graduate students, as evidenced by a quasi-experiment that measured significant improvements in self-efficacy, organization, and stress control (Lucero-Romero & Arias-Bolzmann, 2023). Consistently, Hariharan et al. (2024), in their study with doctoral students, indicated that mindfulness and self-compassion teachings embedded in a leadership course led to significant improvements in stress regulation. Likewise, Sampl et al. (2017) proved that a specific intervention combining mindfulness and self-leadership training demonstrated significant improvements in academic self-efficacy, performance, and stress resilience among students. This finding may suggest that faculty could similarly benefit from such integrated approaches to enhance their self-leadership skills. Therefore, incorporating mindfulness exercises into their teaching routines not only benefits students but also enhances their own mental states, and leads to lower stress levels and higher motivation (Konrad et al., 2023). Consequently, the integration of mindfulness practices into academic settings can improve the self-leadership skills of both students and faculty in HEIs.

3.3 Mindfulness and optimism in higher education

Optimism can be described as a psychological state which is characterized by positive expectations for the future (Marelich & Piercy, 2020; Theodorakopoulou et al., 2023), particularly with a tendency to believe in more positive events than negative ones (Gordeevaa et al., 2021). In other words, optimism is associated with cognitive expectancies about the future with positive affectivity (Glassie & Schutte, 2024; Theodorakopoulou et al., 2023). Therefore, it is related to emotional well-being and emotion regulation mechanisms; namely, appreciation and rumination (Pavani & Colombo, 2023).

In educational settings, the concept of academic optimism (AO) is frequently used, and it reflects the positivity affecting academic outcomes. In this perspective, AO is a complex construct including both positive psychological traits and perceptions that contribute to the improvement of academic performance and well-being among students and faculty in HEIs. It integrates critical elements in fostering a supportive and high-achieving academic environment such as trust, academic pressure, and collective efficacy. In this context, Tschannen-Moran et al. (2013) indicated that AO includes trust in teachers, perceptions of academic pressure, and identification with the school, all of which are positively correlated with student achievement. Consistently, Hoy et al. (2006) revealed that AO is a significant predictor for student achievement even when socioeconomic status and previous academic performance are controlled, and they highlighted its critical role in academic success.

Mindfulness has a profound impact on optimism, particularly on AO, for both students and faculty in HEIs because it fosters a range of positive psychological and academic outcomes. Concerning university students, mindfulness practices support enhancing students' self-regulation, reducing stress, and improving their mood, which contributes to a more optimistic outlook towards their academic and personal growth. For instance, Hammill et al. (2023), in their study with first-year business students, found that short-term interventions of mindfulness improve students' ability to self-regulate technology use and thereby increase their engagement along with a sense of connection at university. Similarly, Konrad et al. (2023) indicated that short activities on mindfulness lead to lower stress levels, higher presence, and more positive mood among students, which can be regarded as critical components of an optimistic mindset. Additionally, mindfulness-based training is linked to increased resilience, which in turn positively impacts academic performance and overall optimism among students (Vidal-Meliá et al., 2022). Moreover, mindfulness practices improve a variety of academic learning abilities such as self-efficacy and emotional satisfaction, which are necessary for maintaining an optimistic perspective in case of academic pressures (Lucero-Romero & Arias-Bolzmann, 2023). Similar to university students, the positive effects of mindfulness in relation to optimism can be observed among faculty members. For instance, Konrad et al. (2023) identified that the lecturers guiding mindfulness exercises reported an improvement in their mental states, which suggests that mindfulness can also enhance faculty's optimism and teaching effectiveness. Overall, the integration of mindfulness practices into academic settings in HEIs significantly contributes to the development of a positive and resilient academic community with AO.

4. Discussion

In this study, the existing literature was theoretically investigated with a conceptual design across the concepts of mindfulness, self-leadership, and optimism within the context of HEIs. Mindfulness can be regarded as a transformative tool in HEIs due to its cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. It promotes students' and faculty members' comprehensive growth in personal and professional aspects along with well-being. Consistently, Calma-Birling and Gurung (2017) found that mindfulness practices enhance university students' knowledge retention of course content, which suggests that mindfulness training can improve students' cognitive performance. Similarly, Bellinger et al. (2015) emphasized that mindfulness increases emotion regulation and cognitive outcomes, particularly in high-stakes testing carried out in academic environments because it reduces anxiety and improves performance on quizzes and exams. Notably, Altinyelken (2023) claimed that mindfulness programs for university students lead to an increase in self-compassion and self-care, and a decrease in self-judgment, which points out positive emotional outcomes. Similarly, Serrão et al. (2022) supported that mindfulness-based interventions can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms among university students, which contributes to a positive impact on emotional well-being. In furtherance, Altinyelken et al. (2020) analyzed the potential of a mindfulness program in improving psychosocial well-being among university students; accordingly, students reported an enhancement in their self-awareness, self-care, and positive attitudes towards others, which indicates its positive social outcomes. Regarding the benefits of mindfulness practices for faculty in HEIs, these practices improve their personal and professional well-being and help alleviate stress, enhance emotional regulation, and cultivate a more connected and supportive academic atmosphere (Rodríguez-Jiménez et al., 2022; Hadar & Ergas, 2019). Moreover, mindfulness strengthens resilience, sharpens decision-making, and encourages ethical behavior, which contributes to a more positive work environment and an increase in teaching effectiveness (Jha, 2021; Parsons et al., 2020).

The integration of mindfulness into educational settings of HEIs enhances self-leadership skills through improving self-regulation, stress management, and emotional satisfaction among both students and faculty. Consistently, Tenschert et al. (2024) identified that mindfulness training is strongly linked to stress reduction, self-regulation, and burnout decrease. Notably, mindfulness is associated with enhanced emotional regulation and improved decision-making among leaders and employees (Gonaduwege et al., 2024; Lippincott, 2018). According to Dix et al. (2022), mindfulness was found to enhance emotional awareness and understanding of the impact of work-related stress, which in turn helped leadership roles. Sampl et al. (2017) also indicated that mindfulness-based self-leadership training led to significant improvements in academic self-efficacy and academic performance among students.

Mindfulness fosters optimism, particularly AO because of its contribution to a positive academic environment characterized by resilience and enhanced performance. As Vidal-Meliá et al. (2022) indicated, mindfulness is positively related to resilience, which leads to better academic performance. Similarly, Senker et al. (2021) detected that mindfulness is beneficially related to academic emotions and leads to more positive and less negative activating emotions, better valence, and increased optimism about academic outcomes. Further, Miralles-Armenteros et al. (2021), in their study with university students, found that mindfulness is positively linked to academic performance, and this relationship is mediated by compassion and engagement.

5. Conclusion

Mindfulness is an effective factor with cognitive, emotional, and social aspects by promoting personal and academic development among university students and faculty members. It significantly enhances self-leadership and optimism in individuals. Therefore, administrators and practitioners in HEIs should consider the positive outcomes of mindfulness-based training for both students and teaching staff. However, unlike its benefits, there are concerns about the adverse effects of mindfulness, especially for vulnerable students. Critics argued that the individualistic and instrumental version of mindfulness in universities may not address the structural causes of stress, anxiety, and pressure, which relies on the individual to cope without addressing systemic issues (Burrows, 2017; Lee et al., 2024; Pinto & Close, 2018). Accordingly, it is recommended that mindfulness, despite all its positive outcomes, should be investigated for its adverse effects on HEIs by employing a variety of research methodologies, and particularly empirical models should be designed in the context of HEIs.

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