

The Impact of Mindfulness-Based Interventions on Wellbeing in University Students

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Abstract: Mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, and depression are common among university students in Vietnam. While mindfulness interventions have demonstrated potential, there is a lack of research specifically focused on Vietnamese student populations. This study assessed the feasibility of a mindfulness program for students at one University in Vietnam. It also evaluated the program's impact on mental health, academic performance, and mindfulness awareness. Fifty students with anxiety/depression joined an 8-week mindfulness program. The program included meditation, yoga, and cognitive skill training. Depression, anxiety, grades, and mindfulness were measured before and after the program. Qualitative data was collected through interviews and focus groups to understand the experience and benefits. The program proved to be viable and well-received by the students. There was a noticeable decrease in symptoms of depression and anxiety, along with an improvement in academic performance and mindfulness following the program. Qualitative analysis revealed themes such as reduced stress, increased self-awareness, improved sleep quality, and enhanced concentration. This investigation found that mindfulness programs benefit university students in Vietnam, improving their well-being and academic performance. Students value the coping skills gained through these practices. It is recommended for universities to consider implementing such programs to address students' mental health needs. Further research on a larger scale is needed to validate these findings among Vietnamese students.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Meditation, University Students, Depression, Anxiety

1. Introduction

Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress are highly common among university students all over the world [17]. In Vietnam, a recent nationwide survey of 3,000 students from 10 universities revealed troubling rates of depression (33.4%) and anxiety (41.9%) [15]. The pressure of heavy academic workloads, financial burdens, homesickness, relationship difficulties, and uncertainty about the future can have a detrimental impact on the well-being and ability to thrive of students [3]. As a result, stress and compromised mental health have adverse effects on the academic performance, social connections, and physical well-being of Vietnamese students [14].

Accessing professional mental health support can be challenging for students in Vietnam due to the limited availability of university counseling services [4]. As a result, there is a need for alternative interventions that focus on the

well-being of students. One such approach is mindfulness, which has shown promise in enhancing the mental well-being of university students worldwide [22]. Mindfulness involves intentionally directing attention to the present moment without judgment or criticism [10]. Through practices like meditation, yoga, and breathing exercises, mindfulness aims to cultivate self-awareness and regulate emotions. These techniques offer a potential solution for students seeking support and personal growth beyond traditional counseling services.

A comprehensive analysis of 24 research studies discovered that mindfulness interventions were effective in decreasing anxiety, depression, and stress levels among college students when compared to control groups [19]. However, there is a distinct lack of research focusing on the feasibility and efficacy of mindfulness programs specifically tailored for Vietnamese student populations. The purpose of this preliminary study was twofold: first, to evaluate the

practicality and acceptability of implementing a mindfulness program for students at one University in Vietnam; and second, to assess its impact on mental well-being, academic performance, and mindfulness levels. These findings will provide valuable insights for developing initiatives that support the overall well-being and success of Vietnamese students.

2. Literature Review

The concept of mindfulness originated from Buddhist meditation practices that date back to ancient times. However, it has now been integrated into various non-religious contexts related to health and well-being [19]. According to Kabat-Zinn [10], mindfulness can be defined as the act of intentionally paying attention to the present moment without judgment, with a specific focus and awareness. Instead of getting caught up in thoughts about the past or worries about the future, mindfulness involves consciously directing one's attention towards current sensory perceptions, thoughts, and emotions. By doing so, individuals can cultivate a greater sense of presence and attunement to their immediate experiences.

Mindfulness interventions have the objective of improving metacognitive awareness, enabling individuals to impartially observe their internal processes without excessively identifying with them [9]. By engaging in activities such as meditation, yoga, and breathing exercises, individuals develop the ability to remain non-reactive and cultivate self-compassion. These mindfulness skills can then be implemented in everyday life to effectively regulate behavior and enhance coping mechanisms.

There are multiple structured programs that focus on mindfulness. One such program is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which consists of eight weekly sessions that teach both formal and informal mindfulness practices. Another program called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) incorporates techniques from cognitive therapy to help prevent relapse in individuals with depression. Numerous meta-analyses consistently demonstrate that mindfulness interventions are effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress in both clinical and non-clinical populations when compared to inactive control groups [8, 11]. These findings highlight the positive impact that mindfulness-based programs can have on mental well-being.

University students around the globe are reporting alarming rates of mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, and thoughts of suicide [17]. The burden of heavy study loads, the pressure to succeed, financial difficulties, homesickness, feelings of loneliness, and uncertainty about the future can all have a detrimental effect on the well-being of students [3]. Consequently, these stressors and compromised mental health can negatively impact the academic performance, social connections, and physical well-being of Vietnamese students [14]. Given the limited availability of counseling services on campuses, it is crucial to explore

alternative supportive interventions [4].

A growing body of research indicates that mindfulness training has numerous benefits for university students, particularly in terms of their mental health and resilience. Various randomized trials have demonstrated that mindfulness programs can significantly reduce self-reported anxiety, stress, and depression symptoms in comparison to control groups [1, 5]. For example, a recent study on an online Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) intervention found that it effectively decreased psychological distress among university students, leading to notable increases in self-compassion and mindfulness [18]. Additionally, qualitative studies have shown that students perceive mindfulness as a valuable tool for managing academic demands and enhancing concentration, learning, and test performance [6]. These findings highlight the positive impact of mindfulness training on university students' overall well-being and academic success.

As mindfulness-based approaches gain traction worldwide in supporting students, it is crucial to conduct research specifically in Vietnamese universities. This research should focus on investigating the acceptability, feasibility, and outcomes of structured mindfulness programs for addressing the mental health needs and academic success of Vietnamese students. Despite the growing evidence of the benefits of mindfulness, it is important to gather localized data to ensure its effectiveness within the Vietnamese education system. By conducting research in this context, we can better understand how mindfulness programs can be tailored to meet the unique needs of Vietnamese students, ultimately improving their well-being and academic performance. Consequently, this research will contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies that can be implemented in Vietnamese universities to support student mental health and enhance their educational experiences.

3. Objectives

The objective of this research was to:

- 1) Evaluate the feasibility, acceptability, and perceived advantages of an 8-week mindfulness program designed for university students at one University in Vietnam.
- 2) Quantitatively assess the impact of the mindfulness program on:
 - a) Symptoms of depression and anxiety
 - b) Academic performance
 - c) Levels of mindfulness
- 3) Collect qualitative data on students' experiences and perceived effects by conducting focus groups and interviews.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Study Design and Participants

The research conducted in this study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to

conduct a thorough evaluation. A total of 50 university students were selected as participants through advertisements placed at one University in Vietnam. In order to be included in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: 1) be between the ages of 18-25, 2) self-report experiencing mild to moderate symptoms of depression and/or anxiety based on predetermined screening cut-off points, and 3) have no previous training or extensive experience with mindfulness meditation.

4.2. Intervention

The intervention comprised of an organized eight-week mindfulness training program that was derived from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Participants attended a weekly two-hour session, guided by an instructor who was certified in MBCT. These sessions included various activities such as guided mindfulness meditation practices, gentle yoga stretches, body scans, and cognitive exercises. The primary goal of these practices was to enhance present moment awareness, nonjudgmental observation of thoughts and emotions, and the ability to respond mindfully instead of reacting habitually. Additionally, participants were assigned daily home practice sessions lasting between 15 to 30 minutes. To ensure cultural appropriateness, the program content was translated into Vietnamese and adjusted based on feedback from local mental health experts.

4.3. Instruments

The study measured various quantitative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, academic performance, and mindfulness. To assess depression symptoms in Vietnamese adolescents, the researchers used the 20-item Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), a self-report questionnaire that has been validated (Pham et al., 2019). Anxiety levels were measured using the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale, which was also validated locally (Tran et al., 2021). Academic performance was determined based on students' GPA for the academic term in which the mindfulness program was implemented, as recorded by the university. Mindfulness itself was evaluated using the 39-item Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, which examines different aspects such as observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging, and non-reactivity (Tran et al., 2013). All the instruments were administered both before and after the intervention.

Qualitative information was collected by conducting three separate focus group discussions lasting 60 minutes each. Each group consisted of 6-8 participants. Additionally, five individual interviews with students were conducted, with each interview lasting 30 minutes. The format of these discussions and interviews was semi-structured, allowing for exploration of various aspects such as experiences in the mindfulness program, perceived advantages and difficulties, impacts on academic and personal life, as well as recommendations. To ensure accuracy, all sessions were recorded and transcribed word-for-word.

4.4. Analysis

To compare the scores on the PHQ-9, GAD-7, GPA, and mindfulness scales before and after the intervention, paired-samples t-tests were employed for the quantitative data. In order to analyze the qualitative data, an inductive thematic analysis method was applied, as outlined by Braun and Clarke [2]. The transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring themes that were associated with the benefits, implementation, and perceived effects of the mindfulness training. NVivo software was used to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data.

5. Results

Fifty university students, aged between 18 and 25 years (with a mean age of 20.5 and a standard deviation of 2.1), took part in an 8-week mindfulness training program. The majority of participants (70%) were female. Among the participants, 86% were undergraduates, while the remaining 14% were pursuing Masters programs. The student body was diverse, with representation from various academic disciplines. Business students accounted for 26% of the participants, followed by engineering students at 18%, sciences at 32%, social sciences at 12%, and humanities at 12%.

5.1. Quantitative Outcomes

Depression. The average initial PHQ-9 depression score was 7.2 (standard deviation = 2.8), suggesting the presence of mild symptoms. Following the intervention, the average score decreased significantly to 4.8 (standard deviation = 2.2), reflecting a noteworthy 33% decrease in self-reported depression severity ($t=5.81$, $p<.001$). This reduction in symptoms was considered substantial, as indicated by a large effect size (Cohen's $d=0.82$).

Anxiety. The initial GAD-7 anxiety score was 6.4 (SD=3.1), indicating a mild level of anxiety. After the intervention, the scores decreased by 29% to 4.6 (SD=2.4), which was a statistically significant reduction ($t=4.73$, $p<.001$) with a moderate effect size ($d=0.67$).

Before the implementation of the mindfulness program, the average cumulative GPA of the students in the previous academic term was 3.21 (with a standard deviation of 0.72). However, after the intervention, there was a significant increase in GPAs, with the mean rising to 3.38 (with a standard deviation of 0.69). This improvement represents a 5% increase ($t=3.24$, $p=.002$). The effect size found was small to moderate, with a value of $d=0.46$.

Mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness has shown positive results in terms of self-reported mindfulness. According to the FFMQ measurement, there was a significant increase from the pre-intervention stage (mean=110.7, SD=14.2) to the post-intervention stage (mean=122.4, SD=11.8), indicating an improvement of 11% ($t=6.41$, $p<.001$). This improvement can be considered substantial, with an effect size of 0.91. It is worth noting that all five aspects of mindfulness - observing, describing, acting with

awareness, non-judging, and non-reactivity - experienced improvement through the intervention.

5.2. Qualitative Themes

Four main themes were identified through the inductive analysis of eight focus groups and interviews:

5.2.1. Decreased Stress and Improved Wellbeing

The participants overwhelmingly expressed that they experienced a reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression after learning mindfulness techniques. They described feeling calmer, more focused, and in better moods. Additionally, they reported improved sleep quality and a greater emphasis on self-care.

5.2.2. Enhanced Academic Focus and Performance

Students shared how they applied mindfulness skills to improve their concentration, prepare for tests, manage academic pressures, and enhance their learning abilities. They also noticed a decrease in mind-wandering during classes, allowing them to stay more engaged and attentive.

5.2.3. Acquired Coping Skills and Self-Awareness

The mindfulness training provided participants with practical tools to deal with stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Students mentioned an increased awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and the ability to recognize unhealthy coping mechanisms. This newfound self-awareness helped them develop healthier ways of managing challenges.

5.2.4. Social Connectedness, Support, and Motivation

The group-based format of the mindfulness program fostered connections among participants, allowing them to share their experiences and support one another. The sense of camaraderie within the group motivated them to continue practicing mindfulness outside of the sessions. Peer support played a crucial role in reinforcing their learning and maintaining their motivation.

In summary, participants reported significant benefits across multiple domains as a result of their mindfulness training. These included reduced stress levels, improved wellbeing, enhanced academic performance, acquired coping skills, increased self-awareness, and a sense of social connectedness and support. The findings highlight the positive impact of incorporating mindfulness practices into individuals' lives.

6. Discussion

Preliminary evidence from this mixed methods study suggests that a mindfulness training program lasting 8 weeks has the potential to enhance mental health, academic performance, and mindfulness skills among university students who are dealing with symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The quantitative results indicated significant decreases in self-reported feelings of depression and anxiety following the implementation of the mindfulness intervention. This aligns with previous studies on mindfulness-based programs for student mental health, as noted by Bamber and Morpeth [1]

and Lazarus et al. [12]. The impact on psychiatric symptoms, as measured by effect sizes, was found to be moderate and comparable to those observed in a recent meta-analysis of 24 mindfulness programs on college campuses conducted by Lee et al. [13]. In addition to the improvements in mental health, participants also experienced an increase in their grade point average (GPA) during the period of mindfulness training. Although the academic effects were relatively modest, these findings are consistent with recent trials that have linked mindfulness to enhanced academic outcomes, such as improved learning abilities, test scores, and grades among university students [7].

Furthermore, students have reported a notable improvement in their mindfulness skills following the training program. The results, measured by the FFMQ, indicate enhancements in various aspects of mindfulness, such as observation, description, awareness, non-judgment, and non-reactivity. These quantitative findings provide solid support for the efficacy of mindfulness as an accessible intervention for reducing psychological distress and potentially boosting academic performance and mindfulness capacities among university students in Vietnam.

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative insights shed light on the specific benefits experienced by the students. The recurring themes that emerged included a reduction in stress and anxiety, an increased ability to concentrate on academic tasks, the acquisition of new coping strategies applicable in everyday life, and the valuable peer support offered within the group setting. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have shown how university students perceive mindfulness as a means to improve concentration, regulate emotions, and cultivate resilience [6, 21]. The participants highly valued the practical life skills gained through the program, which enabled them to effectively manage stress and enhance their overall well-being.

There are, however, certain restrictions in place. The absence of a control group hinders the ability to draw causal conclusions. It is recommended that future randomized controlled trials (RCTs) incorporate active comparison groups for a more comprehensive analysis. Additionally, conducting longer follow-up studies would allow for an evaluation of the long-term sustainability of the observed benefits. To ensure the generalizability of the findings, larger sample sizes are required. Furthermore, conducting further research on the optimal delivery formats, implementation strategies, and cost-effectiveness of mindfulness programs can enhance the existing evidence base as these programs are increasingly implemented in Vietnamese universities to address the growing mental health needs of students.

7. Conclusions

This research study, which utilizes a combination of methods, has yielded initial evidence suggesting that a structured program focusing on mindfulness can be beneficial for university students in Vietnam who are struggling with symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Following the completion of the 8-week program, students reported significant improvements in their mental health and academic performance. The data also indicated moderate to large effect sizes. Additionally, qualitative findings uncovered that mindfulness training enabled students to develop practical coping skills that can be applied throughout their lives, as well as gain support from their peers.

The participants in the study found the training program to be both acceptable and useful in managing the stressors associated with their academic pursuits. They learned various techniques, including meditation, yoga, and cognitive reframing, through interactive group sessions. By enhancing their awareness of the present moment and their metacognitive abilities, students described feeling more capable of regulating their emotions, approaching challenges with mindfulness, and reducing negative thought patterns.

However, there are certain limitations such as a small sample size, lack of a control group, and a short follow-up period. It is necessary to conduct more rigorous controlled trials with long-term follow-up and cost-effectiveness data in order to validate these findings. Nevertheless, the results of this study provide promising early evidence that mindfulness-based programs should be considered as a viable approach to enhancing psychological well-being and resilience among Vietnamese university students who are experiencing increasing demands on their mental health. Brief and easily implementable formats that integrate mindfulness into daily campus life have shown particular potential.

In summary, this initial study suggests that mindfulness training could play a valuable role in supporting the mental health of students in Vietnam's changing educational environment. As an intervention that is based on evidence, centered around students, and does not carry any stigmatization, mindfulness aligns with the emerging holistic models of mental healthcare capacity building for young adults. By incorporating mindfulness practices that are tailored to Vietnamese culture, universities can empower their students to thrive both academically and personally.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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