

Impact of Mindfulness and Academic Performance on Governance

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Abstract

This study examines how mindfulness practices connect to academic performance and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills among 108 postgraduate diploma students at the Royal Institute of Management (RIM) studying National Law, Public Administration, and Financial Management.

Using survey data and multinomial logistic regression analyses, the results show that simply being aware of mindfulness, or practicing meditation occasionally, does not significantly predict academic or SEL outcomes. However, practicing mindfulness frequently correlates strongly with academic success and SEL skills.

Additionally, this study frames these results within Bhutan's broader philosophies — Gross National Happiness (GNH), the developing Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC), and governance. The findings suggest that moderate, consistent mindfulness practice, incorporated within education and governance, can support Bhutan's goals of wellbeing, ethical leadership and overall development.

Keywords: Royal Institute of Management, Mindfulness, Academic Performance, Social–Emotional Learning, Gross National Happiness, Gelephu Mindfulness City, Governance, Bhutan

Introduction

In a time of rapid technological change, shifting economies and growing social-emotional demands, education systems worldwide must do more than just pass on knowledge. They must nurture critical thinking, emotional resilience and meaningful societal engagement.

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In Bhutan, this goal aligns closely with the national philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which asserts that development is not just about economic measures, but also about the overall wellbeing of the people, their emotional health, cultural richness and sound governance.

Mindfulness, defined as present-moment, non-judgmental awareness (according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, among others), has gained attention as a potential mechanism to support these broader goals. While international research has documented links between mindfulness interventions and improved cognitive focus, reduced stress and enhancements in emotional regulation (Hölzel et al., 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1994), there has been relatively little empirical investigation in Bhutan at the postgraduate level.

This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how mindfulness practice among RIM postgraduate diploma students correlates with academic performance and SEL skills, and by situating the findings in the evolving frameworks of GMC and GNH, particularly as they pertain to governance.

Gross National Happiness and its Domains

Bhutan adopted GNH as a guiding principle for development many years ago. It covers various areas of wellbeing, including psychological wellbeing, health, education, time use, cultural resilience, environmental sustainability, community vitality, living standards and governance.

One of these areas — psychological wellbeing — explicitly includes mindful practices, resilience and satisfaction with one's inner life. Therefore, practicing mindfulness serves not only as a personal tool but also as part of Bhutan's national strategy for good governance and overall wellbeing.

Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC)

GMC is a special administrative region being developed along Bhutan's southern border. It aims to be a community that incorporates mindfulness into its design, education, governance, workplace culture, infrastructure and public spaces.

Key features of GMC include green spaces, walkability, meditation and wellness centres, mindfulness-based education, ecological sensitivity,

cultural coherence, and governance rooted in reflection, humility, service and community wellbeing. Aligning mindfulness practices in educational institutions with GMC's values could better prepare students for leadership roles both within and outside the City, contributing to governance that reflects Bhutanese values.

Literature Review

Research internationally supports the relationship between regular mindfulness practice and positive educational and social-emotional outcomes.

Holzel et al. (2011) found that mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) enhances cognitive functions, emotional regulation and stress resilience. Teodorczuk et al. (2016) and Napora (2013) document that mindfulness interventions help reduce test anxiety and procrastination, improving academic results.

In Bhutan, studies such as Effect of Mindfulness Meditation Practices on Students' Behaviour Change in Secondary Schools in Trashigang District (Tshering, 2021) observed that mindfulness meditation practice is associated with positive behaviour change among adolescents.

The alignment of mindfulness with Bhutan's spiritual traditions, Buddhist values and GNH has been explored in works such as "Aligning Spirituality and Development: The Role of Buddhism in Bhutan's Gross National Happiness". That work emphasises concepts such as detachment, acceptance and present-moment awareness as being central to both spiritual growth and societal wellbeing.

Despite these foundations, there remain gaps — particularly in studies focused on postgraduate students — in the quantitative strength of association between frequency of mindfulness practice and measurable academic/SEL outcomes, and in exploring how these associate with governance trends such as GMC.

Methodology

Population: 108 postgraduate diploma students at RIM (National Law, Public Administration, Financial Management).

Measures: Three standardised instruments were used.

1. The Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) to measure levels of mindfulness/Awareness.
2. Academic Performance Scale (graded bands: Fail, Pass, Credit, Distinction, High Distinction).
3. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills questionnaire assessing interpersonal, emotional regulation, self-awareness, etc.

Analysis: Multinomial logistic regression using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), to test the association between mindfulness (awareness, practice frequency) and the outcomes (academic grades, SEL skills). Gender and course major may be included as covariates.

Results - Key Findings

Awareness vs. Practice Frequency: Awareness of mindfulness or simply meditating occasionally shows weak or non-significant influence on academic performance or SEL skills. In contrast, frequent practice (e.g., weekly or daily) shows significant positive associations with higher academic grades and better SEL skills.

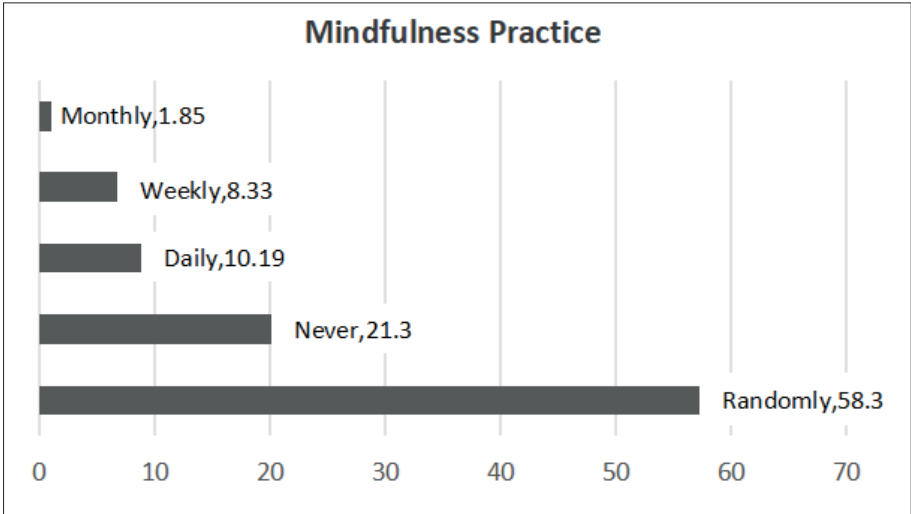


Chart 1: Frequency of Mindfulness Practice amongst students (%).

Academic Performance Distribution: Most students achieve Credit (C) band; fewer reach Distinction (D) or High Distinction (HD) and Fail (F). The proportion achieving High Distinction and Distinction is quite small, correlated most strongly with daily-weekly frequency mindfulness practice.

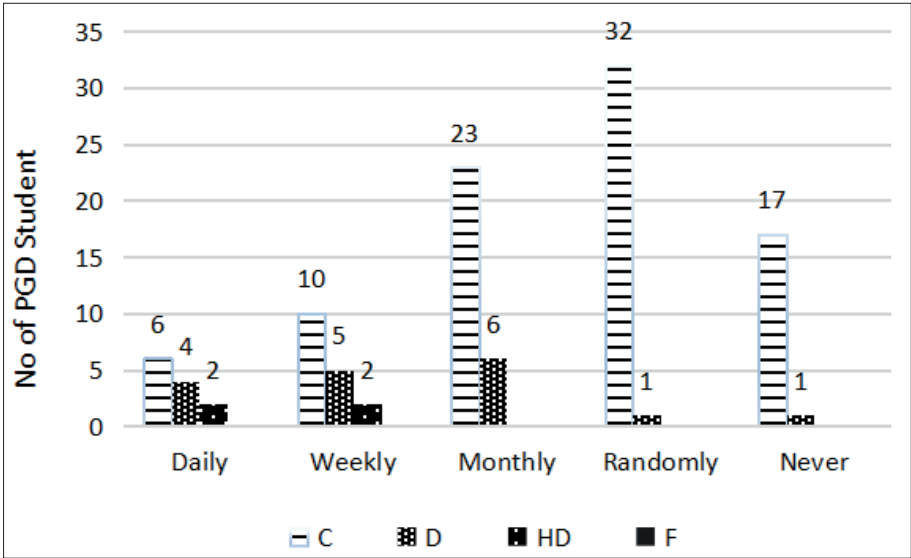
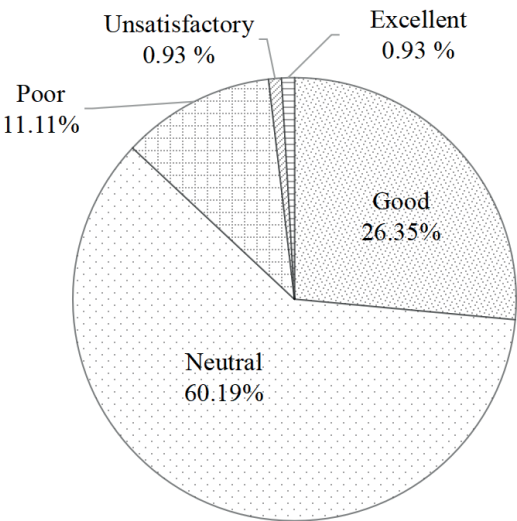


Chart 2: Academic Performance with Mindfulness Practice

SEL Skills: Social learning skills tend to be moderate for many; emotional skills show greater variation, with many students having neutral or poor emotional regulation and awareness.



% Social learning skills

Chart 3: Social and Emotional Learning skills

Stress Reduction: Many respondents believe that mindfulness helps reduce stress and positively influence their academic life.

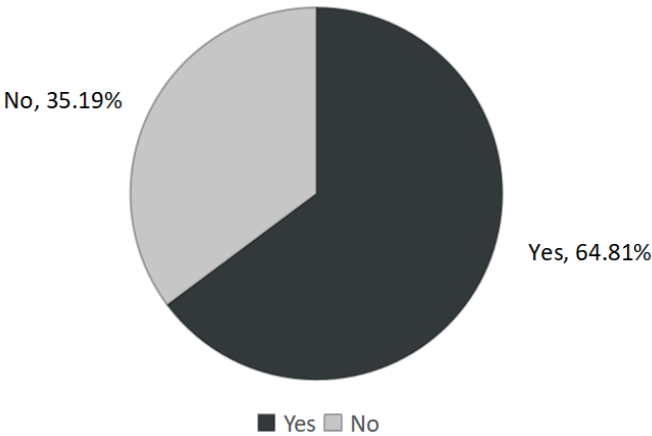


Chart 4: Does Mindfulness reduce stress?

Students practicing mindfulness more frequently are more likely to belong to higher grade bands (Distinction or above).

In multinomial logistic regression, moderate practice (Level 3) often yields a strong positive odds ratio for higher academic categories. Very high levels sometimes show inconsistent association — possibly due to small sample sizes, or trade-offs where time in practice reduces study time for some.

For SEL skills, frequent mindfulness practice is significantly associated with better social learning skills (e.g., co-operation, empathy, community participation). Emotional skills show a positive trend but with greater anomalies — some frequent practitioners still report lower emotional skill assessments, possibly due to self-awareness bias.

Discussion: Aligning to Governance, GMC, and GNH

Governance

Bhutan's governance paradigm under GNH emphasises that public policy and administration are not just technical but deeply ethical, incorporating mindfulness through domains of psychological wellbeing, community vitality and good governance.

The findings of this study suggest that embedding mindfulness in education (including postgraduate learning) could strengthen future public servants' capacity for emotional regulation, empathy, critical thinking and resilience — traits that support ethical governance, policy deliberation and democratic participation.

Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC)

The GMC project aims to integrate mindfulness into its physical, social, educational and governance structures. For example, policies envision workplaces with wellbeing and purpose, spirituality, education that fosters inner and outer development, governance shaped by reflection, humility, innovation and service, and built environments that reduce stress and encourage reflection.

This study's evidence — that frequent mindfulness practice correlates with academic success and SEL skills — suggests that institutions in GMC (e.g., educational institutions, local and district governance bodies) would benefit by including structured mindfulness programmes, training in SEL and regular practice to produce graduates aligned with GMC's values.

Gross National Happiness (GNH)

Since GNH includes psychological wellbeing, emotional skills, community vitality, and good governance among its focus areas, the study's results fit well with GNH's vision. For example, frequent mindfulness practice promotes psychological wellbeing and emotional regulation.

As a result, academic performance enhances the education domain, one of the key pillars. Moreover, improved social and emotional skills contribute to stronger community connections, nurturing ethical and empathetic leaders who ensure good governance. Thus, this study not only demonstrates that mindfulness has individual benefits but also that these benefits support Bhutan's broader vision of happiness and development.

Limitations

The sample size and representativeness are limited. While 108 is a reasonable number, very few students fall into the extreme categories (e.g., High Distinction), which could lead to unstable estimates.

Mindfulness practice frequency and SEL skills are self-reported through the Mindfulness Awareness Attention Scale, subject to social desirability or bias.

The study was conducted on cross-sectional design and captures only associations, not causation. Longitudinal or experimental designs (with interventions) would better establish causal links.

Students who are conscientious or have better time management or mental health engage in more mindfulness, and also perform better academically. These were not fully controlled for. A more empirical pre-post-test in various environments considering co-founding variables would have added scientific data.

Recommendations

Institutionalising Mindfulness Programmes

With inspiration from the GMC Vision, and through this study, RIM had set up a mindfulness and wellbeing unit, institutionalised contemplative, mindfulness arrival and guided practice in events and programmes. Similarly, educational institutions and RCSC/Agencies should include dedicated regular (30 minutes) mindfulness sessions/workshops, SEL skill training, and perhaps meditation labs or space.

Integrate into Curriculum

Embed mindfulness and SEL into course curricula, not just as optional extras, especially in RCSC training and GMC educational framework.

Governance Training

For public administration students / civil servant trainee officers, besides SIY, offer customised modules on mindfulness, self-awareness, ethical leadership and empathy as part of governance, aligning with GNH pillars.

Balance in Practice

Encourage moderate, consistent practice rather than overemphasis on very high levels that might compete with other demands (as very high levels sometimes showed inconsistent correlation).

Further Research

Bhutan needs to cater to evidence-based research on Mindfulness: longitudinal studies; qualitative studies to explore subjective experiences; experimental interventions; investigate optimal frequency/duration; and explore the threshold where more is not necessarily better.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the idea that mindfulness is more than just a personal or spiritual practice; it has clear connections to academic success and social-emotional learning among postgraduate students in Bhutan.

While simply being aware of mindfulness is not enough, frequent practice seems to significantly enhance academic performance, emotional regulation and social skills.

These findings strongly reflect Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness and the developing Gelephu Mindfulness City, which aims to incorporate mindfulness into governance, education, built environments and societal norms.

As Bhutan progresses, there is a chance to systematically weave mindfulness into policy, governance and education. This integration can help produce not just knowledgeable graduates but also compassionate, resilient citizens and leaders grounded in ethics.

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