

Mindfulness for international students

Bangor University



Pilot project into the international student experience in the UK
2017-18

**UK Council
for International
Student Affairs**

UKCISA

**UKCISA GRANTS SCHEME
FOR INTERNATIONAL
EDUCATION**

Mindfulness for international students Bangor University

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Project rationale

The Counselling Service at Bangor University has been providing a variety of psychological services, including Mindfulness for all students for many years, but in annual audits of the service the consistent findings were that there was less uptake from international students¹.

The area in which international students are most likely to make use of counselling resources is through the groups and workshops programme. The evaluation received from international students is that they appreciate the group work that has been offered.

Previous feedback indicated that Mindfulness is a resource that enhances wellbeing across many cultures, and across all faiths and none. With the funding awarded by UKCISA in 2017-18 the Counselling Service at Bangor University piloted a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course tailored specifically to international students. Mindfulness courses are always delivered in ways which are appropriate for each group. One way in which the delivery of the course was adapted for international students was to avoid working in pairs and encourage small group work which students found less pressurising.

Research has shown that MBSR courses deliver many benefits, including increased ability to handle stress, improved concentration and an enhanced sense of well-being. Learning mindfulness skills takes some time and practice and a course where the skills build cumulatively from week to week has proved to be a very effective learning experience.

The project aimed to:

- provide an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course targeted at international students as a way of offering psychological support to a group under-represented in one-to-one counselling
- research the effectiveness of this intervention through recognised outcome measures and qualitative feedback
- enhance cross-cultural relationships between different international student groups
- investigate the appropriacy, efficacy and generalisability of providing such group work in a Higher Education Institution (HEI)

It was also anticipated that the project would enhance and improve the interface with the University's International Welfare Support Services. The group was run in the environment of the University's faith centre, which had the additional benefit of familiarising more international students with this venue as a useful resource for them.

Project outcomes

22 international students were recruited in all, across two MBSR groups. The course was evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative measures. In qualitative feedback 100% of participants rated the overall course as good or very good. From the feedback gathered it is evident that participants derived many different benefits from the course. They learnt skills which enhanced their personal development and capacity to manage stress and difficulty. From observation it was also clear that friendships and cross-cultural relationships developed among the participants in both groups. Both groups formed supportive communities where participants felt safe, free to be themselves and were able to understand and support each other. Of those who completed the course all clinical outcome measures (CORE 10), 69.2% showed improvement in levels of functioning and wellbeing.

Project delivery

Advertising, recruitment and attendance

“Discovered skills and resources that have proven to be very useful in moments of distress or discomfort but also in moments of joy too”.

The eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Course (MBSR) targeted at international students was advertised before and after the December 2017 break. The course ran from the Orientation session on Monday 22 January until Monday 19 March 2018. The course was advertised through all-student emails by the Counselling Service. In addition, the International Student Service advertised it through their newsletter, posters prepared by the Support Officer, via social media and personal contact. Some students picked up application forms in the International Office and submitted them there. The forms were then forwarded to the Counselling Service. A few students were met with individually to assess the appropriateness of the course for them.

The application and assessment process ensures that students who may have experienced trauma or previous mental health problems understand the nature of the course. The counsellor can assess the appropriateness of MBSR for individuals and students can make an informed decision about joining.

During the same timeframe the Counselling Service was running its usual provision of an MBSR course open to all students, but on a different day. Owing to timetabling commitments some international students opted to join the general course and some home students joined the international group. In



Photo:
Marcel Clusa

MBSR group for International Students

many ways this has proved advantageous, allowing a greater mix of students in both groups.

Both courses were delivered by Sue Williams², one of the student counsellors in the counselling service and a fully-trained Mindfulness teacher, who has extensive therapeutic qualifications and experience, in addition to the Level 2 Teacher Training for Mindfulness³.

22 international students were recruited in all, 12 in one group and 10 in the other. The mix of nationalities included Filipino, Turkish, Japanese, Indian, Chinese, Malaysian, American, Norwegian, Austrian, Swedish, Czech, Lithuanian, Romanian, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and German.

One of the International Support Officers attended the course billed for international students as a participant and as extra support for both the students and the course teacher. His enthusiasm was a key factor in good recruitment of participants. His presence also enhanced co-operation between the Counselling and International Services. Both Services gained a better understanding of each others' departments and personal relationships were built between staff. Both these aspects will facilitate easier referral between departments in the future.

In past years around seven to 10 international students have been recruited to the general all-student MBSR course so **the targeted recruitment and participation of the International Office increased recruitment substantially.**

The course consisted of the orientation meeting followed by eight weekly afternoon sessions of two hours. The orientation session is an opportunity for prospective participants to get an idea of what the course involves, the demands of attending, the potential benefits and to meet other group members. They also have an opportunity to experience the approach. The session involves a short meditation followed by a period of enquiry. This helps people to make an informed decision about their participation and reduces drop-out rates. There was also a requirement for participants to undertake a daily home practice of 30-60 minutes.

Four students dropped out during the course; two for personal reasons and two because of clashes with an academic commitment. All absences were followed up by email with an offer of an individual meeting if extra support was needed. This offer was taken up on two occasions. This follow-up helped to contribute to a low drop-out rate.

18 students completed the course with an average attendance of seven out of the nine sessions.

Evaluation

The course was evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Qualitative measures

At the end of the course all those attending the final session filled in a paper evaluation about their experience of the course. 15 evaluations were

completed; three people were unable to attend the final session and efforts to collect these forms via email were unsuccessful.

The table below summarises the answers to question 1⁴ of the evaluation form:

Question 1

Please tick the number that you feel most closely represents your opinion of the workshop (5 = very good, 1 = poor)

	5	4	3	2	1	
Cyflwyniad o'r cwrs	11	4				Presentation of the course
Tafenni a chyfarpar gweledol	12	3				Handouts and visual aids
Sut yr ymdriniwyd a'ch cwestiynau	13	1	1			How your questions were dealt with
Defnyddion a perthnasol i chi	10	4	1			Usefulness and relevance to you
Mwynhad cyffredinol o'r cwrs	10	4	1			Overall enjoyment of the course
Barn gyffredinol o'r cwrs	12	3				Overall rating of the course

From this it can be seen that satisfaction ratings were very high. 100% of participants rated the overall course as 'good' or 'very good'.

A selection of personal feedback comments in response to the other questions on the form follows. This offers a flavour of the experience of the participants.

What skills/knowledge have you learnt from the course?

"Taking more distance from negative thoughts and preventing spiralling."

"I have learnt strategies to cope with everyday stress, identify triggers and acknowledge them but not react".

"Discovered skills and resources that have proven to be very useful in moments of distress or discomfort but also in moments of joy too".

"I learned how to 'see' my thoughts and recognise my emotions. So the act of rationalising what I think and feel helps me to face situations with more awareness and serenity".

What aspects of the course did you find most useful?

"The accepting atmosphere really helped me to be vulnerable and work on myself".

"Practices that worked on stress and anxiety and the group aspect of the course, interacting with other people".

"Living and enjoying the present".

What aspects of the course did you find least useful?

"Not every awareness exercise felt like it worked, but then sometimes that is just from the individual not the fault of the practice".

"I struggled with self-practice at home. I really needed reminders to practice, because I forgot it a lot".

"Amount of time spent on body scans".

Did you gain any additional benefits from the course? If yes, what were they?

"My classmates are all very good at sharing and listening. I feel really relaxed during the class".

"I now have more tools to deal with stress. I feel more connected to my body".

"I reduced the time I spend with a negative thought".

"I have a different (better) attitude towards myself".

"I learnt a new way to see the real life".

"I have benefitted greatly from the course and I would strongly recommend it to other students. You are in a group where all the students are there for the same reasons so you feel understood and not judged. Besides nobody forces you to speak or do something, so everything is done in your own time".

Please note any further comments about the course/facilities that you would like to make.

"The organisation behind the whole course was perfect. The sessions took place in a very quiet and warm room. Moreover we were provided with all the material that was necessary for enjoying the most our experiences".

"The instructor was very competent and kind".

Quantitative measures

All students filled in two research questionnaires at the start and end of the course. A well-researched mental health measure, CORE 10 was collected⁵. A second measure FFMQ (Five Facet Mindfulness

Questionnaire) was also collected⁶. This captures data relating to the mindfulness skills targeted in the course. 14 sets of forms were collected in total.

According to the CORE data collected, one participant deteriorated (this result was highly anomalous compared to the participant's other feedback, suggesting possible misunderstanding of the questionnaire). Three participants recorded 'no change', four participants improved, one participant clinically improved and four participants clinically and reliably improved⁷.

The Paired Samples T Test was used to analyse data from the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire⁸. In the group overall there was a significant improvement in three of the domains measured: observing, acting with awareness and non-reactivity. There was also an improvement, although not significant, in the domain of describing. Only in the non-judging domain was there no evidence of change.

Reflections

From the above it can be seen that participants derived many different benefits from the course.

The group facilitator also requested feedback from the staff member from the International Office, Marcel Clusa:

'The MBSR course was a great platform for international students to learn about techniques and tools to manage stressful situations. The fact that it was targeted towards international students made it more engaging for them but also gave them extra confidence in discussing their thoughts and feelings in their non-native language knowing everyone was on the same boat. It was a safe space for all and the internationalisation of the course definitely helped in that sense.'

'We would like to see more courses like that in the future to help improve the students' wellbeing. With mindfulness courses, students can open up about how they feel and learn how to address and react to stressful situations, which is something that will positively affect not only their personal life but also their academic performance and future success.'

Appropriacy, efficacy and generalisability

The results above would indicate that the pilot project delivered a service to international students that was helpful, appropriate to their needs, and valued by a wide spectrum of international students; male and female, of varying ages and

nationalities. Staff resources permitting, it is anticipated that the Counselling Service at Bangor University will continue to promote its Mindfulness programmes to international students, and work to maintain the very positive contact made with International Office staff. The Counselling Service and the course facilitator have subsequently been approached by other university counselling services for advice and recommendations on providing such groups for their own students.

Recommendations to other services would include

- Ensuring that such groups are led by a qualified Mindfulness teacher
- Appropriate recruitment and, if need be, assessment and selection of group members, as well as an orientation meeting before the group commences
- Securing an appropriate venue for the duration of the course. MBSR courses are best taught in a large room (some meditations are lying down) with moveable furniture and a carpet. It needs to be private, and quiet is helpful but not essential. Access to yoga mats, cushions, meditation stools and blankets enhance the experience but are not essential.
- Securing the support and assistance of the HEI's International Office staff at each step of the process, particularly in promotion and recruitment of the course.

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Further information

Visit www.ukcisa.org.uk/Bangor for the following:

1. Application form
2. Information sheet for participants
3. Poster
4. Quantitative results data

5. Background information on Bangor University
6. CORE 10 form

References

¹ See findings from University of Plymouth report, 2016, UKCISA
<http://bit.ly/2EadTsD>

² An account of the mindfulness work of the Counselling Service including the international aspect of this work can be found on this blog:
<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/blog/experiencing-our-common-humanity-33172>

³ <https://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/professional-practice.php.en>

⁴ As Bangor is a bilingual University, all forms are bilingual- Welsh and English

⁵ In the original UKCISA application bid it was proposed that CCAPS 62 would be used but this proved impractical because of the number of questions, and also the need to input data electronically on only one iPad. Instead the facilitator chose to use paper copies of CORE 10 and collate and analyse data later. CORE 10 (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation) is a nationally used system of audit and evaluation that allows mental health services to monitor and evaluate clinical/reliable improvement in their clients/patients (it is used widely across the NHS and HE Counselling Services) See www.coreims.co.uk These forms allow the Service to monitor improvement (or no change/ deterioration) in their clients.

⁶ Baer, R. A., Smith, G. T., Lykins, E., Button, D., Krietemeyer, J., Sauer, S., & Williams, J. M. G. (2008). Construct validity of the five facet mindfulness questionnaire in meditating and nonmeditating samples. *Assessment*, 15(3), 329-342. (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1073191107313003>).

The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire used by Baer et al: https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Five_Facet_Mindfulness_Questionnaire.pdf

⁷ 'Clinical and /or reliable improvement' is measured firstly by whether a client moves from above to below the clinical cut off, and secondly, those clients who significantly improve. 'Above clinical cut off' is the term used for a score that is representative of users of users of mental health services in the NHS sector.

⁸ See Appendices in the online version of this report for table.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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