

More Than Just Tea and Sympathy: A Classical Mindfulness-Informed Philosophy for Higher Education Coaching Practice

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Abstract

This article critically examines mindfulness-informed workplace coaching in UK Higher Education. It argues that dominant secular, individualized approaches to mindfulness-informed coaching risk functioning as mechanisms that responsabilize staff for systemic pressures while obscuring structural inequalities. Challenging assumptions of ethical neutrality, the article contends that non-judgmental awareness without ethical discernment may reinforce staff adaptation rather than transformation. It proposes a coaching philosophy grounded in classical Buddhist mindfulness, emphasizing ethics, wisdom and compassion, and aligning with developmentalist coach education to support reflexivity, collective responsibility and systemic change.

Keywords: mindfulness, coaching, workplace, higher education, ethics

Introduction

This theoretical article aims to provide a critical perspective on mindfulness-informed coaching practice within Higher Education (HE) and the underlying philosophies informing this practice. The author argues that workplace coaching can be viewed as a vehicle for promoting individual responsibility and self-regulation (Brown, 2021) while ignoring or normalizing social, structural and organizational workplace problems. The article questions the lack of critical reflexivity within HE coaching practice, exploring how ethically neutral approaches to coaching workplace wellbeing may unintentionally be contributing to rising levels of mental health problems within such organizations (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020).

The author moves on to argue that the solution to these challenges is to harness the capacity of coaching within the workplace as an enabling process, capable of stimulating ethical reflection and fostering resistance to workplace practices harmful to staff wellbeing. These aims can be achieved through a move from coaching as ‘doing’ towards coaching as ‘being and relating’ (Clarke, 2025), concepts that are highly congruent with classical Buddhist mindfulness practice (e.g., Stanley, 2022). Acknowledging the ‘social turn’ (Gannon, 2021) of coaching as a vehicle for personal, social, and organizational change, the author proposes a new philosophy of workplace coaching in HE. This approach positions Bachkirova et al.’s (2017) developmentalist reconceptualization of coach education alongside classical Buddhist trainings of wisdom, ethics and compassion. The article concludes with an exploration of the potential challenges to and opportunities for the practice of such a mindfulness-informed coaching philosophy within the current HE landscape. The article also explores implications for current and future HE workplace coaching practice, and recommendations for further research.

Asking David to take on Goliath – Workplace Coaching and Wellbeing in HE

Coaching approaches have become increasingly popular within Higher Education (HE) across a wide range of situations including staff development programs, inductions, change management, career support, and performance feedback (Harding et al., 2018; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2015). Academic coaching for students has been linked to improvements in academic performance and retention, goal setting and achievement, and wellbeing (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Atad & Grant, 2021, McFarlane, 2023, as cited in Campbell & Mogashana, 2025). Leadership coaching plays an increasing role in supporting organizational change within HE (Cruz & Rosemond, 2017), and has been identified as a potentially fruitful means of supporting wellbeing and performance for academics and senior leaders (Lynden et al., 2024). However, while there is a body of evidence demonstrating the benefits of coaching for students, there is limited evidence to date regarding the efficacy of such interventions for staff, particularly in relation to wellbeing. As noted by Harding et al. (2018), “The sector does not appear to have fully explored the value of coaching, or the tools available to evaluate it” (p. 8), and evidence for positive outcomes is still largely drawn from other professional workplace contexts (Lynden et al., 2024).

Institutional, political and social factors can all influence and inform coaching practice, helping to shape the personal and professional values and beliefs brought into the coaching space (Iordanou & Hawley, 2020). However, political factors influencing coaching have been “long-side-lined as a result of preoccupation with a technical approach to coaching and the sustaining of performance” (Shoukry & Fatien, 2024, p. 18). The growing influence of psychology and psychologists within the coaching profession can be seen in the promotion of individualist approaches, with the individual as the focus of coaching (Western, 2025). The prevailing approach of psychology to the wider fields of mental health and wellbeing is to work with individuals, but when such individuals are asked to take responsibility for systemic drivers of ill-health, we are, as Kuyken (2026) notes “asking David to take on Goliath – a heroic tale, but not realistic.” Nevertheless, current workplace coaching practice within HE often aims for adaptive outcomes at the individual level, helping workers *cope with* systemic workload pressures rather than aiming for higher order goals such as addressing the root causes of stress, workload intensification, or toxic cultures. This raises the question of the extent to which HE workplace coaching practices are willing to confront these root causes, to be courageous in ethically engaging with power and acknowledging its potential misuse within organizations.

The more recent but growing influence of individualist wellbeing practices such as mindfulness within HE workplace coaching (e.g., Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2015; Micklitz et al., 2021; Bartlett et al., 2019) reflects both the profession’s biggest strength and arguably its most significant weakness. Coaching draws on an eclectic range of ideas, practices and theories (Cox et al., 2014) and this interdisciplinarity drives the profession’s creativity and appeal. However, although reflection is central to coaching, it is often instrumental rather than critical or reflexive, focused on improving the effectiveness of existing practices rather than questioning whether such practices and the systems they exist within are just, sustainable, or desirable (Brookfield, 2017; Ng et al., 2019). When approaches such as mindfulness-informed coaching prioritize individual sense-making this may produce adaptive rather than transformative outcomes, shaping staff identities in alignment with organizational norms (Western, 2012). This risks promoting the transfer of responsibility for institutional issues

to individual staff members (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019), positioning performance and wellbeing as matters of individual choice and self-management. In this context coaching rewards self-regulation by promoting greater individual resilience, positivity, and continued focus on the achievement of workplace goals (Giraldez-Hayes, 2021; Davies, 2015) rather than reflexive resistance to systemic practices which impact negatively on staff wellbeing (Brown, 2021).

From Doing to Being and Relating - Ethical Reflection and the Social Turn in HE Coaching

Traditionally, coaching has adopted a stance of ethical neutrality rooted in the non-directive traditions of client-centered therapy (Rogers, 1951) whereby coaching is client-led, values are suspended and the coaches influence is at best implicit. Ethical practice in coaching is put forward in a set of values that focuses on ethical conduct, which forms an integral part of the coach's professional identity. However, discrepancies regarding the core ethical values of coaching exist between the various bodies regulating coaching practice, reflecting the difficulties coaches may experience in applying codes of conduct to resolve ethical issues in practice (Duffy & Passmore, 2010). By maintaining a position of ethical neutrality, coaching, whether knowingly or unknowingly, may support organizational goals without critique. As noted earlier, systemic issues risk being reframed as individual mindset problems, and staff self-regulation is promoted over collective change. By adopting a position of ethical ambiguity and neutrality coaches may avoid challenging exploitative workloads, toxic leadership cultures, and institutional injustice/structural inequalities. As Shoukry (2017, as cited in Shoukry & Fatien, 2024) notes, "In every situation where coachees are part of an oppressive social structure, coaching becomes a political process, even when it takes place under the banners of life, career, or developmental coaching" (p. 20). Considered through this lens, coach neutrality functions less as Rogerian informed non-judgmental presence and professional distance and more as institutional compliance (Van Zyl et al., 2024). This is an unsettling idea, and runs contrary to the core ethical standards of Coaching Psychology to work in the best interests of clients at all times, demonstrate an understanding of power dynamics and their impact on clients, and recognize the relevance of organizational and systemic issues within coaching and practice accordingly (Division of Coaching Psychology, 2026).

The idea of the 'coach as neutral facilitator' is therefore both theoretically flawed and limiting for the coaching relationship (Clarke, 2025). To move past such positions, workplace coaching must resist reduction to a one-size-fits-all approach of instrumental practice foregrounding behavioral competencies and tools. It must mature from *doing* towards *being* and *relating* (Clarke, 2025). Coaching can be an enabling process, capable of stimulating ethical reflection, and resistance to toxic workplace practices, depending on how it is practiced and the institutional objectives it serves (Grey et al., 2016). It involves making decisions regarding what is morally right or wrong (Iordanou & Hawley, 2020) but knowing what is good is insufficient without putting this into practice. Thus, coaching within HE can be seen as sitting at the intersection of empowerment and control. Coaching has the capacity to function as a liberating vehicle for staff in collectively negotiating power and authority within the workplace (Shoukry & Fatien, 2024).

Historically, conversations around ethics in coaching have lacked criticality, largely focusing on codes, duties, competence, and confidentiality (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015). However, more recent critical discussions around coaching ethics have challenged the

managerial framings of coaching discussed above. By rejecting coach neutrality in favor of alternatives promoting dialogue and a greater focus on the relationship, coaching practice has been reimagined as a co-created space emphasizing presence, mutuality, and recognition, (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020; Stelter, 2018). This has been described as a ‘social turn’ in coaching (Gannon, 2021), providing new opportunities to understand coaching as an agent for personal, social, and organizational change. As increasing numbers of HE coaches work in the same organization as their clients, avoiding or ignoring the wider organizational and social context is both unrealistic and, as discussed above, unethical. Such ‘internal’ coaches often operate in the liminal space between the individual and organizational levels, and this offers the opportunity for a purposeful role in facilitating change at a systemic level (Maclean, 2024).

The social turn in coaching provides the platform for developing a more ethically informed model of practice within HE workplaces. Coaching has the opportunity to purposefully acknowledge political factors, challenge potentially harmful workplace narratives, and reengage with collegial and collective practices that serve the higher order goal of improving health-related outcomes for staff. Coaching as a critically reflexive practice moves from instrumentalism (doing) towards co-created spaces emphasizing presence, mutuality, and recognition (being and relating). Such a move reflects and embraces concepts that are highly congruent with classical Buddhist mindfulness trainings of wisdom, ethics and meditation (e.g., Stanley, 2022). It is to this area of coaching practice that the author now turns.

Mindfulness Informed Coaching Practice within HE

As noted above, mindfulness-informed practice has been described as one of the more recent ‘well-meaning’ influences in workplace coaching (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020) vulnerable to co-optation by individualist agendas. Research has identified a range of qualitative factors within mindfulness practice that can be used by coaches and/or with their clients in the workplace to support wellbeing. These include fostering a sense of openness and inquiry, increasing work engagement and sleep quality, developing a non-judgmental approach to self and others, practicing with compassion, curiosity and kindness, creating space for clients, and practicing in a more effective and respectful way (Theaker, 2017; Michel et al., 2021; Hall, 2013; Van Den Assam & Passmore, 2022). However, a recent review of the application of mindfulness to coaching practice (Passmore, 2019) concluded that organizational mindfulness research is still developing a comprehensive case for the wide-scale application of mindfulness-informed coaching in the workplace. Therefore, despite an exponential growth of interest in and research concerning mindfulness (Baminiwatta & Solangaarachch, 2021) the picture with regards to mindfulness-informed coaching practice in the workplace remains an unclear one. This conceptual ambiguity is reflected in discussions about whether mindfulness is a dispositional quality or a process, an ethical belief or a technique, a form of spirituality or an aspect of secularism, an instrument of professional therapy or popular culture, or a type of medicalized therapy (Germer, 2004; Williams et al., 2012; Harrington & Dunne, 2015; Hanley et al., 2016, as cited in Baguley, 2025). Research into workplace mindfulness emphasizes classical notions of awareness, meditation and spirituality while ‘secularizing’ these into biological, behavioral, and neuropsychological processes (Islam et al., 2017).

Secular Mindfulness Practice and the ‘McMindfulness’ Critique

This classical/secular delineation reflects two distinct conceptual approaches to understanding mindfulness practice for workplace coaching. Western or secular mindfulness has tended to focus on behavioral medicine applications, with the overall goal of alleviating distress through an emphasis on present moment experiences, and training clients in more skillful ways of coping with issues such as low mood or stress (Baer, 2007, as cited in Hanley et al., 2016). Secular mindfulness has been operationalized through the development of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The role of ethical practice within MBIs is implicit, drawing on aspects of Buddhist practice which are cultivated as traits, such as learning to pay attention to present experiences (Maex, 2011). Secular mindfulness-based programs have been linked to improved wellbeing, greater awareness and self-regulation, and the ability to more skillfully manage stress in the workplace (Micklitz et al., 2021; Bartlett et al., 2019). Systematic reviews of workplace-based mindfulness interventions have highlighted performance and wellbeing benefits at individual, team and organizational levels (Johnson et al., 2020) including improved resilience, job satisfaction and team performance.

However, while the majority of secular MBIs focus on improvements in wellbeing for the individual (Carmody, 2014) these approaches tend to promote a focus on self-well-being at the expense of underplaying how coachees relate mindfully to others (Dawson, 2021). The absence of an explicit ethical framework means the non-judgmental awareness taught by secular practice may foster a range of negative coachee stances from self-indulgence to passivity (Monteiro et al., 2015). This ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser & Loy, 2013) critique positions secular workplace MBIs as de-natured spiritual practices reduced to institutional performance-enhancing activities, promoting individual symptom relief, resilience and productivity while masking systemic inequities (Purser, 2019; Forbes, 2019). Coachees may be encouraged to adapt to workplace stressors (such as high workloads, bullying from line managers or precarious working conditions) rather than questioning them, thus reducing client agency and capacity for critique. Such approaches may also inadvertently create more pressure for coachee attainment of results, promoting the expectation of having a positive mindfulness experience and heightening the risk of guilt, self-blame or perceived personal failure when mindfulness does not ‘fix’ their problems (Baguley, 2025). This commodification of mindfulness as a panacea for workplace wellbeing (Hyland, 2015) risks reputational damage for the coaching profession. The promotion of quick fix solutions to complex problems (Vu & Gill, 2018) of a systemic nature may lead coaching clients to feel misled, eroding trust in both mindfulness practice and coaching practice.

The ethical dilution of secular mindfulness within workplace coaching also means certain practices may be simplified into superficial techniques without adequate ethical grounding. Coaches with a lack of training and personal experience in mindfulness meditation may not be adequately equipped to understand the nuances of mindfulness practice, as well as its possible negative effects (Dawson, 2021). Delivering mindfulness-informed coaching without adequate training and experience may have a deleterious effect on coachee wellbeing. Several studies have noted reports of somatic and mental distress experienced by participants of mindfulness programs (Taylor et al., 2022), and Passmore (2019) has argued for a greater consideration of the risk factors associated with the application of mindfulness in organizational settings moving forward. To mitigate these risks, it is important that coaches drawing on secular mindfulness

within their practice be equipped with the necessary training and skillset to recognize and respond appropriately to participants' reports of distress and adverse events (Binda et al., 2022).

Classical mindfulness practice

On this basis, mindfulness might appear highly incompatible with the development of a more mature philosophy of HE coaching practice foregrounding ethics and systemic change. However, when we turn to classical or Buddhist conceptualizations of practice, we begin to find more congruity. Classical mindfulness is defined as a stage of mental and meditative development that is embedded within the noble eightfold path – a sequence of practices leading to greater wisdom, ethics and concentration/meditation (Hanh, 1999; Stanley, 2022). These practices include right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. The practice of 'right mindfulness' is an important distinction between Buddhist and secular mindfulness practice. Mindfulness, when practiced in isolation from the other eightfold paths (such as right intention or right action) can lead to 'wrong mindfulness' and reinforcement of unwholesome practices and suffering (Monteiro et al., 2015). Ethical judgement is viewed as an integral feature of classical mindfulness practice, starting with right understanding (or right view), which serves as a form of ethical compass for subsequent steps (Thānissaro, 2012). Mindfulness, the seventh practice on the noble eightfold path, is supported by previous paths requiring the exercise of restraint, ethical discipline and behavior (Dreyfus, 2011). This reflects a practice that embodies ethical qualities such as kindness, compassion, equanimity, generosity and courage (Grossman, 2015). The eightfold paths aim for transformational thinking and behaviors leading to greater psychological well-being, ethical behavior, and social responsibility (Purser and Milillo, 2014). Indeed, some scholars argue that the fundamental ethics of mindfulness, the practice of compassion for every living being recognizing the interdependence and connectedness of all persons, represents, "A radical, activist worldview and practice that gives the lie to self-centered seekers of power over others, be it personal, corporate, or collective" (Forbes, 2012, p. 1).

So, within classical conceptions of mindfulness practice, ethical behavior and social responsibility are foundational to the practice of right mindfulness. The aim of Buddhist mindfulness therefore is not simply to raise attention, improve decision making or decrease stress but to promote human flourishing, virtuous behavior and compassion and altruism for the welfare of others. These values of compassion, selflessness and asceticism can be seen as inimical to the practices of Western individualism described above (Stanley et al., 2018). Classical mindfulness practice has been criticized for promoting a set of values and morals that are not congruent with modern Western values-neutral practice (Monteiro, 2015). However, it is these values and morals that an ethically mature model of workplace coaching can and should embrace. As Purser and Milillo (2014) note, "A mindfulness that is 'Buddhist inspired' cannot be divorced from its civic aspect that represents the wider ethical, social and political dimensions" (p. 17).

Returning to the McMindfulness critique of secular mindfulness practice, Monteiro (2015) argues that the practice of mindfulness must offer a larger vision than changing individual suffering through symptomatic relief, with a developing focus on the interpersonal. Such goals may be achieved through a renewed focus on how mindfulness informed coaching in the workplace setting can contribute towards wider social and interpersonal benefits relating to

ethical behavior, compassion, social sustainability challenges and collective gains for workplace wellbeing (Sajjad & Shahbaz, 2020; Shabaz & Parker, 2021).

Second Generation Mindfulness-Based Interventions and Coaching

A more recent response to the challenges laid down by the McM mindfulness critique of secular MBIs is the development of Second Generation Mindfulness-Based Interventions (SG-MBIs) (Van Gordon et al., 2015). SG-MBIs such as Meditation Awareness Training (MAT) (Van Gordon et al., 2014) differ from first generation MBIs (FG-MBIs) in four key respects – they have an overtly spiritual nature, they employ a greater range of meditative techniques, they feature ethics as a key component of the taught program, and they use an instructor training program that normally requires several years of supervised mindfulness practice. Unlike the non-judgmental awareness taught in FG-MBIs, SG-MBI's promote an active and discriminative form of awareness, encouraging adaptive responses to situations rather than a passive acceptance (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020). SG-MBIs draw on contemplative traditions, existential and transpersonal psychology by reintegrating existential and spiritual dimensions, emphasizing Buddhist values of compassion, ethical practice, and non-attachment (Van Gordon et al., 2016).

SG-MBIs provide a framework for the coach as facilitator of systemic change (Maclean, 2024), challenging performance-focused and instrumentalist approaches to mindfulness-informed workplace coaching in HE. An SG-MBI informed coaching framework encourages the promotion of values such as discriminative awareness (e.g., of ethical and unethical workplace practices), a sense of openness and inquiry, compassion for self and others, and non-attachment (e.g., to material aspects of work practice) within the workplace. This approach encourages coaching to give greater consideration to the role of ethical practice within workplace wellbeing interventions. It promotes greater transparency around coach training, alongside more consideration for client needs and the appropriateness and timing of MBIs within the workplace (Baguley, 2025). Encouraging such changes at the ground level of an organization can create micro-climates within the work environment that foster support, compassion (Monteiro et al., 2015) and the cultivation of collective ethical resistance to harmful workplace practices. This civic aspect can be drawn on through coaching to enhance staff awareness of how systemic practices within HE may contribute to workplace suffering, stress and harm.

SG-MBI informed coaching can also promote a critical reevaluation of the scope of wellbeing practices within HE, for example in relation to the notion of integrity bubbles (Healey, 2013). These are pockets of practice sufficient enough to enhance employee satisfaction and brand image even as they undermine the achievement of integrity in the broader organizational context (Shoukry & Fatien, 2024; Van Zyl et al., 2024). Furthermore, such approaches may help coaching clients to consider whether to use their widened attention to challenge the *status quo* and initiate corrective actions to reduce their and others' experience of corporate or organizational harm (Purser & Milillo, 2014).

Aligning SG-MBI informed practice with developmentalist models of coaching

Recent critical discussions around coaching ethics have challenged instrumental, ethically neutral coaching approaches, driving a reimagining of practice as a co-created space emphasizing presence, mutuality, and recognition (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020; Stelter,

2018). By exploring the contribution coaching can make to societal concerns as a social process (Gannon, 2021), developmentalist coaching education and training foregrounds ethical reflexivity and engagement with power through approaches that focus on the value of relationships and co-created dialogue (Clarke, 2025). Such approaches align with SG-MBIs in resisting the reduction of wellbeing to a means of enhancing workplace productivity by promoting staff self-awareness, with a greater focus on meaning, authenticity, and values (Purser & Milillo, 2014). This represents coaching as a collective rather than individualistic approach to workplace wellbeing. The role of the coach becomes to acknowledge staff positionality, promoting greater understanding of individual values, views and location in relation to the wider organization. Coaching becomes a reflective space for values-based action, identity exploration, and the drawing out and naming of power dynamics (Passmore & Lai, 2019). SG-MBI informed approaches support such a workplace coaching practice by purposefully acknowledging political discourse, challenging potentially harmful workplace narratives, and reengaging staff with collegial practices that serve collective health and wellbeing.

Bachkirova et al.'s (2017) developmentalist model of coach education positions coaching as “a meaningful dialogue in which new ideas, values and actions are conceived with an overarching aim of developing the overall capabilities of clients to engage with their environment” (p. 36). Rather than focusing on what the coach can do this model places an emphasis on who the coach is able to be (Bachkirova, 2016). The author finds significant congruity between the core intentions of this model and the SG-MBI informed coaching practices described above.

First, both approaches reject instrumentalist framings of professional development. Bachkirova et al. critique competency-based coach education for neglecting the developmental conditions that enable ethical and reflective practice (Bachkirova et al., 2014). The development of SG-MBIs was an explicit response to McMindfulness critiques and the reduction of mindfulness to an instrument for individual wellbeing (e.g., Purser, 2019; Van Gordon et al., 2015). Second, both frameworks emphasize transformation of meaning-making. The development of coaching practice within Bachkirova et al.'s model – from instrumentalist towards self-reflective and self-transforming perspectives (Kegan, 1994; cited in Bachkirova, 2012) – parallels SG-MBI aims to step back from identification with fixed self-concepts (e.g., those driven by individualist workplace performance demands) and cultivate an openness to new perspectives through contemplative insight (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020). Third, ethics are treated in both models as emergent skills rather than compliance with external rules. Ethical maturity is cultivated through interaction, shared knowledge and collective reasoning. Bachkirova (2016) frames ethical coaching as dependent on the coach's developmental capacity for reflexivity and perspective-taking. SG-MBIs situate ethics as intrinsic to awareness, non-attachment, and compassion (Shonin et al., 2016). In both cases, ethical action is understood as flowing from a deeper understanding of how the self is constituted (e.g., within the workplace) rather than from adherence to procedures, competency frameworks or codes of conduct. Taken together, these meeting points suggest that SG-MBIs can be meaningfully located within coach education as developmentally supportive pedagogies that cultivate existential depth, intellectual maturity, and ethical discernment. SG-MBI-informed coaching embraces open-ended inquiry, a willingness to develop greater discriminative awareness of the self in relation to one's surroundings and others, and a greater capacity for reflective practice. Here, coaching is positioned not only as an individual practice but as a potential resource for collegial and

collective workplace action, ethical resistance to toxic workplace conditions and engagement with systemic change.

Implications for practice

An SG-MBI-informed approach provides a framework for workplace coaching practice within HE to purposefully acknowledge political discourse, challenge potentially harmful workplace narratives, and reengage staff with collegial practices that serve collective health and wellbeing. Fundamental to SG-MBI informed coaching is the rejection of individualism as the predominant paradigm for our understanding of workplace wellbeing, and the repositioning of practice towards collective and collegial action (Clarke, 2025). Right mindfulness practice requires a commitment to social responsibility (Monteiro et al., 2015), providing further momentum to the social turn in coaching (Gannon, 2021).

This approach offers benefits for practitioners, clients, and society more broadly. As noted above, engagement with SG-MBI mindfulness practice requires a strengthening of ethical practice, training and personal experience in mindfulness meditation for coaches. Van Gordon et al. (2017) recommend that practitioners wishing to use mindfulness in a treatment context should undergo supervised mindfulness training for a period of at least three years with a range of experienced teachers. Such a commitment underlines the repositioning of mindfulness-informed coaching from a tool or quick fix towards mindfulness as a sustained practice that requires commitment and patience. As Dawson (2021) notes, mindfulness practice requires commitment and patience precisely because the attachment to being immediately rewarded for our efforts and making progress is deeply engrained within us. Promoting a more discriminative and active form of awareness for coaches may increase staff agency and capacity for critique, supporting more adaptive responses to the workplace stressors discussed above. Creating a safe space for kindly and compassionate reflection acknowledging the political, corporate and structural causes of workplace stress may also serve to decrease feelings of guilt, self-blame or perceived personal failure associated with individualized wellbeing interventions.

Such practices can be seen as a form of dynamic resistance (Darby, 2016), drawing on classical mindfulness philosophy to promote opposition to structural challenges negatively impacting on workplace wellbeing. Dynamic resistance foregrounds social justice values such as compassion, solidarity and collective empowerment within everyday practices, in this case workplace coaching within HE. Here, the goal of SG-MBI informed coaching is to pay attention to relationships, storytelling and reflective practices that challenge individualization. This approach acknowledges that coaches and coachees within HE may simultaneously work within and resist toxic workplace cultures and practices. Mindfulness-informed coaching practice therefore becomes a resource for developing a critical consciousness within organizations, facilitating macro-level critiques of structural problems (Leggett, 2022).

Ethical maturity within SG-MBI coaching practice, cultivated through interaction, shared knowledge and collective reasoning also supports the development of ‘quiet ego’ in coaches (Bauer & Weatherbie, 2023). This umbrella term refers to a process of transcending self-interest through the development of more balanced concerns for self and the welfare of others (Huffman et al., 2015). Development of quiet ego can lead to a greater sense of inclusive identity (sense of interconnectedness with others), fostering greater collective action and resistance to toxic

workplace practices. Quiet ego characteristics also include greater perspective-taking and compassion towards others, and mindful detached awareness – the ability to step back from ‘ego-defensive’ responses to challenge. Such approaches may serve to support opportunities within the coaching space to explore organizational change and growth.

Challenges to the adoption of SGMI-informed coaching within the current HE landscape

Re-instrumentalization

A developmentally informed integration of SG-MBIs into coaching training and practice requires sustained attention to ethics, power, and purpose. Framing SG-MBI practices as mechanisms for producing ‘better’ coaches risks re-instrumentalization, reproducing the performance-focused processes that developmentalist and SG-MBI scholars critique (Bachkirova et al., 2014; Purser, 2019). Embedding SG-MBIs within coach education without critical reflexivity risks reproducing ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser & Loy, 2013). Buddhist practices of wisdom, ethics and meditation risk becoming tools for self-optimization or professional credentialism. To mitigate this, SG-MBI informed coaching practice must foreground purpose, power, and ethical intent, explicitly addressing why mindfulness is being introduced and whose interests it serves (e.g., Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020). This includes acknowledging organizational pressures and the potential complicity of coaching in promoting narratives of individual responsibility for systemic issues (Smoliak et al., 2025; Brown, 2021). SG-MBIs can be understood not as techniques to enhance coaching performance, but as contemplative practices that support the developmental capacities discussed above, upon which ethical coaching depends.

Cultural incongruence

As noted above SG-MBIs have been criticized for imposing a set of values and morals that are inimical to the practices of western individualism (Stanley et al., 2018). Critics argue classically informed mindfulness interventions lack scientific rigor, contrary to the prevailing paradigms of values-neutral coaching practice and wider positivistic focus of wellbeing interventions within the workplace (Monteiro, 2015). Secular or FG-MBIs are promoted as being more accessible to the general client population, limiting the risk of negative reactions from perceptions of the approach being based in religious frameworks (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Advocates of secular mindfulness argue that the essence of Buddhism is universal and doesn’t require explanation or explication within MBIs. Ethics are implicitly embedded within concepts and practices naturally (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and each person carries the responsibility both personally and professionally to attend to the quality of their inner and outer relationships. The ethical foundation of FG-MBIs such as MBSR rests on its affiliation with professions that hold their own ethical guidelines (e.g., coaching accrediting bodies). The translation of traditional Buddhist mindfulness practices into Western scientific and workplace practice is justified through the idea of ‘skillful means’ or *upaya* (Maex, 2011), taking the essence of mindfulness and translating it into the neoliberal workplace language and frames of reference for our times.

To mitigate these challenges SG-MBI informed coaching must explicitly address why mindfulness is being introduced into workplace coaching practice and whose interests it serves (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020). The universality of Buddhist ethics as noted by Kabat-Zinn also

provides a counter-narrative for SG-MBI coaching practice. Taken from a perspective of universal concepts, moral responsibility, courage, expectations, and action may be a way of using secular ethics to resolve the reluctance to impose 'religious' values on participants of SG-MBI programs (Monteiro et al., 2015). Buddhist ethics and values are not primarily based on "proscriptive or prescriptive rules decreed from higher moral authorities" (Grossman, 2015, p. 18). They are based on the distinction between harmful thoughts and actions, and those meant to be benevolent. Contemplation of such distinctions emphasizes the emergent capacities of reflexivity, ethical maturity, and perspective-taking within developmentalist coach education and practice.

Who is the client?

While professional coaching traditionally positions the individual coachee as the client (e.g., Grant, 2017), the critiques of workplace coaching practice within HE discussed above view coaching as a multiple-client practice. Organizational and political practices and interests directly impact staff wellbeing but are often obscured, left unacknowledged and unaddressed within the coaching space. Workplace coaching may operate as a mechanism for aligning coaching outcomes with organizational norms (Smoliak et al., 2025; Western, 2012). The individual coaching client in this system becomes the responsabilized subject, self-governing, adaptable and responsible for their own performance and wellbeing (Brown, 2021). The *de facto* client in HE workplace coaching is in fact often the HEI itself, which funds the coaching, defines the criteria for successful outcomes and return on investment (ROI), and provides the institutional context which the goals of coaching should align with. As discussed above (Gray et al., 2016; Shoukry & Fatien, 2024), from this perspective workplace coaching might be seen as a form of human capital development, improving employee wellbeing for the productive good (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020).

This position creates a significant ethical tension for workplace coaching. What happens when the needs and wellbeing of the individual client do not align with the organizational objectives of coaching? The significant escalation in reported poor mental health for HE staff (Kinman, 2014; Kinman & Wray, 2020) suggests that the individual wellbeing needs of staff are not being successfully addressed through organizational coaching objectives. What is required of HEIs to facilitate this? While SG-MBI-informed coaching may stimulate changes at the ground level (Monteiro et al., 2015), do these simply feed into individualist approaches sustaining longer-term challenges for staff wellbeing? SG-MBI informed coach training and practice has the opportunity to introduce an absent third client into the workplace coaching conversation – the collective and public interest (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). Such interest, as represented by groups such as unions, professions, or staff bodies (e.g., professional services or research staff) are rarely recognized as coaching clients. Individualism within workplace coaching foregrounds coping, adaption and personal wellbeing rather than exploring critiques of organizational narratives and developing solidarity through collective resistance. Developmentalist, SG-MBI-informed coaching practice requires an ethical maturity from workplace coaches regarding these organizational pressures, acknowledging the potential complicity of coaching in sustaining systemic issues contributing to poor workplace wellbeing. To do this, coaching must adopt a critically reflexive position on who the client is in coaching, asking whose interests are prioritized within existing coaching systems and whose are marginalized?

Conclusion

This article sets out to provide a critical perspective on mindfulness-informed coaching practice within HE and the underlying philosophies informing this practice. By critically interrogating the ethics of neutrality and situating coaching within analyses of organizational power structures (Shoukry & Fatien, 2024; Van Zyl et al., 2024; Clarke, 2025) the article highlights the ethical and political positioning of contemporary coaching practice in HE. The article has proposed a more developmentally mature and ethically grounded coaching philosophy. This approach is informed by SG-MBIs in dialogue with Bachkirova et al.'s (2017) developmentalist model of coach education. This convergence offers a development pathway for workplace coaching within HE, moving past instrumental problem-solving towards reflexive, relational and ethically engaged practice.

A coaching practice capable of holding individual experience alongside structural critique.

The article acknowledges the challenges of implementing SG-MBI informed workplace coaching within current HE systems (Western, 2012; Gray et al., 2016; Shoukry & Fatien, 2024). However, this approach offers a promising pathway for cultivating ethical discernment, collective wellbeing and principled resistance to toxic workplace cultures. In doing so it is hoped coaching practice can positively contribute to the possibility of systemic change in HE, a decrease in workplace stress and improvements in staff wellbeing

Future research

There are several studies exploring the application of mindfulness for UK workplace coaching practice (Van Den Assem et al., 2024; Passmore, 2019; Chaskalson & McMordie, 2017). However, these are concerned with secular mindfulness practices rather than SG-MBI informed coaching. Furthermore, the focus within such studies is on the individualized benefits for coaches, clients and the coaching relationship, predominantly relating to non-discriminative processes of present moment-focused attention. To the best of the author's knowledge there are no studies to date exploring the impact of mindfulness-informed coaching practice for staff wellbeing within HE, nor any exploring the wider ethical and collective benefits of mindfulness practice for staff and organizational wellbeing. This may reflect the particular cultural biases and perceived lack of scientific rigor for more classically-informed approaches within the coaching community discussed above.

To establish the practical applications of SG-MBI-informed coaching approaches for staff wellbeing in the HE workplace, future research should explore the extent to which such programs enable participants (staff, coaches, and organizational groups such as unions or researchers) to utilize Buddhist principles of right thought, action and attention to challenge the *status quo* and initiate corrective actions to reduce harmful workplace practices (Purser & Milillo, 2014). Research might examine how SG-MBI coaching can support greater reflexivity and positionality for coaches. For example, do such approaches help coaches become more aware of structural constraints and how they can damage client well-being, and to be more self-reflective in their role supporting/challenging such constraints? And to what extent does this approach deepen and enrich the support offered by coaches to staff wellbeing in HE? Such

research will further support the development of coaching as an agent for higher order systemic goals, aiming for social and organizational change (Gannon, 2021).

Mindfulness-informed, developmentalist coach training brings a richness of ideas, values and actions for coaching. Future research should also explore the phenomenological or lived experience of practitioners completing an SG-MBI training program, who coach within HE settings. The essentially introspective nature of mindfulness practice lends itself to qualitative methodologies. Van Gordon and Shonin (2020) highlight the need for more post-intervention practice support for participants, citing the 4- to 12-week intervention timeframe as insufficient for refining and developing the basic practice principles participants learn during the program. This indicates a need for more longitudinal and ethnographic studies analyzing the institutional conditions shaping mindfulness-informed coaching practice within HE.

Finally, an important feature of SG-MBIs is the extent to which the instructor is able to impart an embodied understanding of the technique in question (Shonin et al., 2016). In the hands of an inadequate instructor, SG-MBIs are not only likely to have limited effectiveness but may end up contributing to one of the key problems they seek to address (i.e., McMindfulness). Therefore, future research should explore the impact of teacher training, experience and practice (their embodiment of mindfulness) on participant experiences of completing a SG-MBI within HE settings.

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