

Still is the New Strong: Why Mindfulness Practices Belong in Higher Education Institutions – Insights from the InMind B-NEw Project

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Abstract

This paper presents insights from the *InMind B-NEw* project, funded by the *Stiftung Innovation in der Hochschullehre*. It examined mindfulness practices as an innovative teaching concept to cultivate inner development and essential skills and attitudes among future professionals to proactively contribute to a sustainable future. Aimed to raise awareness in higher education about its role in sustainable development, the project used a crowd innovation approach to (1) study potential effects on future professionals, (2) identify implementation barriers, and (3) develop a practical guideline.

Keywords

Higher Education Institution; Mindfulness in Higher Education; Future Professionals; Inner Development Goals; Employability; Mixed Methods

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1 Introduction

In a world of rapid and unprecedented change (WEF, 2025a, 2025b), the question arises: how can students be empowered to not only adapt to change, but actively initiate change toward a sustainable future? Regarded as *future professionals*, they are the focus of organizations' recruitment efforts, holding the potential to influence the sustainable change needed for both the organization itself but also the broader society. Therein, *higher education institutions* (HEIs) possess a distinctive role in the development of these future professionals given their status as institutions that combine teaching, research, and societal engagement, as well as the notable increase in the number of individuals purchasing higher education in recent years (UNESCO, 2021, 2024).

In response to this question, the one-year *InMind B-NEW*¹ project was initiated at HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management (HHL) and FH Erfurt University of Applied Sciences (FHE). The project was based on research showing that simply informing individuals about necessary change for a sustainable future seems not to adequately motivate them to take action and can sometimes even result in a defensive attitude toward change (Moser & Dilling, 2011). Thus, the proactive contribution to a sustainable future seems to require more than information, it rather depends on a future professional's *inner development*, which combines a set of intrapersonal skills and attitudes, such as self-awareness, and empathy

through which the gained information can be translated into sustainable actions and decision-making (e.g. Bandura, 1995; Matthies, 2005; Ruesch Schweizer et al., 2018; Stålné & Greca, 2022; Wamsler & Bristow, 2022; Woiwode et al., 2021). Movements like the *Inner Development Goals* (IDG) initiative – a non-profit organization founded in 2020 as a collaborative effort between academia, organizations and society – underscore this assumption. Within its five dimensions *Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating*, and *Acting*, the cultivation of intrapersonal and social skills and attitudes as part of such inner development (Stålné & Greca, 2022) is prioritized over purely cognitive ones (Ehlers & Eigbrecht, 2024; WEF, 2025a) to promote the rather information-based *Sustainable Development Goals* (UN, 2015). Moreover, the *future skills* currently identified by the *World Economic Forum* (WEF, 2025a) also no longer appear to be purely cognitive, but are increasingly intrapersonal and value-based, further emphasizing the importance of inner development.

Despite their traditional role as knowledge providers, these current movements towards essential skills and attitudes for a sustainable future (e.g. Stålné & Greca, 2022; WEF, 2025a) demonstrate the necessity to enhance the inner development of future professionals within HEIs (Barber et al., 2013; Bengu et al., 2020; OECD, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2005; WEF, 2025a; Zhao, 2011). However, prevailing *teaching concepts*, which are intended to “provide [future professionals] with something that is radically and

essentially new, something they did not have before” (Pitkäniemi, 2020, p. 24) seem not to fully cultivate the intrapersonal, social, and value-based skills and attitudes related to inner development. Consequently, literature frequently discusses the necessity to move away from or extend conventional cognitive-centric teaching concepts within HEIs (e.g. Ehlers & Eigbrecht, 2024; Pechstein & Schwemmler, 2023), further pointing out that these concepts often result in increased stress levels due to heavy workloads among future professionals and even hinder their inner development (Pascoe et al., 2019).

Consequently, *mindfulness*, seen as the non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, has emerged as a promising teaching concept to extend the missing inner development (Alomari, 2023; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Thus, the project focused on the examination of mindfulness practices, which may provide a potential access to inner development and stillness despite external turbulence. Mindfulness practices can support the proactive contribution to a sustainable future by enhancing long-term motivation and commitment to change (Brunner & Kowalski, 2021; Halady & Rao, 2010; Waddock, 2024). By implementing teaching concepts for inner development such as mindfulness practices, HEIs could support a *sustainable development* “that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 41), and potentially strengthen their future professionals' *employability* by cultivating the

¹ *InMind B-NEW* = German acronym for Iterativer Crowd-Innovation Ansatz zur Etablierung von Mindfulness als innovatives Lehrmodul zur Förderung der Bildung für Nachhaltige Entwicklung (transl.: Iterative crowd innovation approach to implement mindfulness as an innovative educational facilitator to promote ESD).

essential skills and attitudes currently demanded by the labor market for a sustainable future, ultimately securing their gainful employment (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; WEF, 2025a).

2 Essential Skills and Attitudes for a Sustainable Future

The current IDG framework (IDG, 2025) in Figure 1 describes 25 skills and attitudes that are assigned to five dimensions: (1) *Cultivating our inner life*

encompasses the development of a conscious awareness of oneself, others, and the world, (2) *Understanding our complex world* refers to expanding the ability to grasp different perspectives and their consequences, (3) *Caring for others and the world* focuses on developing a shared sense of belonging that is expressed in empathy and care, (4) *Building trust and working together* involves understanding collective impact and forming trusting, appreciative relationships, and (5) *Leading and enabling change* describes strengthening optimism and courage to enable change together.

Further, the WEF's (2025a) most recent *Future of Jobs Report* lists eleven future skills that are highly relevant for the successful transformation of organizations and will become increasingly important for a sustainable future by 2030. These skills are: (1) motivation and self-awareness, (2) resilience, flexibility, and agility, (3) curiosity and lifelong learning, (4) systems thinking, (5) creative thinking, (6) analytical thinking, (7) empathy and active listening, (8) leadership and social influence, (9) talent management, (10) AI and big data, and (11) technological literacy.

With the exception of the WEF's (2025a) last two skills, it is noteworthy that both the IDG as well as the future skills framework can be classified as intrapersonal, social, and value-based skills and attitudes, underlying the emphasis on inner development. Further, the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (Staats, 2003) also suggests that the cultivation of sustainable attitudes can represent an essential component of inner development. Therein, attitudes may serve as a crucial predictor of subsequent sustainable change and actions, thereby playing a pivotal role in the proactive contribution to a sustainable future. This underscores the necessity of repurposing prevailing teaching concepts that are highly cognitive-centric and simultaneously indicates that the needed skills and attitudes may be fostered through similar teaching concepts.

Being Cultivating Our Inner Life	Thinking Understanding Our Complex World	Relating Caring for Others and the World	Collaborating Building Trust and Working Together	Acting Leading and Enabling Change
Inner Compass	Critical Thinking	Appreciation	Relationship-Building Skills	Courage
Integrity & Authenticity	Perspective Skills	Connectedness	Inclusive Mindset & Intercultural Competence	Hope & Optimism
Openness & Learning Mindset	Systems Thinking	Humility	Co-creation Skills	Conscious Use of Resources
Self-Awareness	Long-term Orientation & Visioning	Empathy & Compassion	Communication Skills	Proactivity
Presence	Creativity	Forgiveness	Mobilization Skills	Resilience

Figure 1: IDG framework. Source: IDG, 2025.

3 Mindfulness Practices

Current research has shown that mindfulness, defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145), has been associated with an individual’s inner development (Cooper & Gibson, 2023; Stålné & Greca, 2022). This occurs through the development of two key elements: (1) an “unbiased awareness that emerges through intentionally and continuously paying attention to subjective momentary experience with [2] an open, accepting, benevolent, and compassionate attitude” (Böhme et al., 2016, p. 6). According to Kabat-Zinn (2003), this awareness and attitude can be accessed through formal practices such as mindfulness meditation, body scans, or mindful movement. Therein, mindfulness practices have the potential to engender novel modes of being, thinking, and acting (Ergas & Hadar, 2023) by fostering skills and attitudes such as resilience (e.g. Asthana, 2021; Brunner & Kowalski, 2021; Stork et al., 2022; Zarotti et al., 2020), and empathy (e.g. Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Berila, 2016; Zajonc, 2013). Considering these findings, the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) highlighted mindfulness as a promising teaching concept as early as 2018. Further, the IDG initiative provides initial educational approaches that implement inner development into teaching concepts, thereby also connecting to

the potential role of mindfulness practices (Stålné & Greca, 2022).

4 Project Setup and Methodology

The project objective was to examine mindfulness practices among future professionals as an innovative teaching concept to cultivate inner development and thus the essential skills and attitudes to proactively contribute to a sustainable future. In accordance with this objective, *InMind B-NEw* has been structured around five work packages as illustrated in Figure 2:

1. **Project management**, including goal alignment, timeline adherence, and effective communication among all stakeholders, such as HEIs, future professionals, and the foundation.
2. **Backlog development using the CI approach**, including the implementation of a *crowd innovation* (CI) approach² with a variety of stakeholders engaged at different stages of the project as well as a backlog development using *miro* as management tool.
3. **Iterative mockup development, evaluation and revision**, including evaluation and revision activities through an experiment, expert interviews, focus groups, and a workshop allowing the iterative development of initial *InMind B-NEw* course offerings.

4. **Prototypical implementation, conduction and validation**, including the implementation and execution of the insights, the utilization of existing resources such as *Canvas* and *Moodle* as well as a validation process supported by further focus groups.
5. **Development of a rollout strategy**, including the translation of the findings into a practical implementation guideline for other HEIs.

2 Crowd Innovation Approach = Collaborative and non-hierarchical approach that enables an unlimited number of individuals to jointly develop solutions by leveraging the collective knowledge and expertise of diverse stakeholders, including internal organizational members and external experts (Collm & Schedler, 2012).

The project employed a **mixed-methods approach**. While **work package one** was primarily dedicated to administrative tasks, **work package two** entailed a **desk research** phase on German HEIs that had previously implemented mindfulness practices, as well as

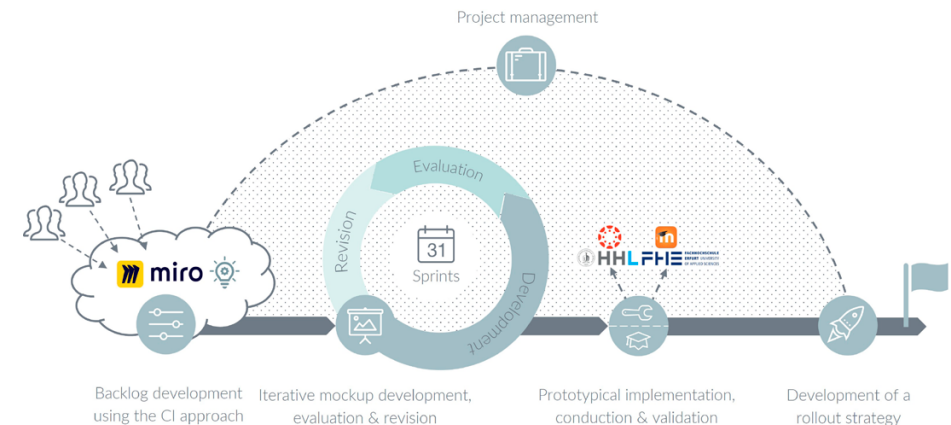


Figure 2: Project setup of *InMind B-NEw*. Source: Authors' own work.

on relevant networks (e.g. *Achtsame Hochschulen*³ or *Institut für Achtsamkeit Verbundenheit Engagement*⁴). Furthermore, initial internal communication initiatives were established to recruit future professionals and HEI staff for the planned project measures. The purpose of this was to iteratively integrate the resulting crowd into **work package three**, which comprised three main components: (1) a **quasi-experiment** with future professionals from HHL and FHE, (2) **semi-structured interviews** with members of other German HEIs who had been involved in the implementation of mindfulness practices, and (3) **focus groups** and a **workshop** with members from HHL and FHE. To provide an integrated synthesis of the project's overall insights, the individual methodological components are presented only briefly for contextualization. While in-depth analyses of the quasi-experiment and the semi-structured interviews are reported in separate publications (Plietzsch et al., 2024; Plietzsch et al., 2025, under review), the findings presented here extend these detailed studies by incorporating additional data from the focus groups and the workshop, thereby offering a comprehensive consolidation of all insights generated throughout the project year.

The quasi-experiment (Plietzsch et al., 2024) aimed to investigate whether mindfulness (independent variable) is interrelated with the attitudes toward sustainable development (dependent variable). To this end, an eight-week hybrid *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) course was offered to future professionals at HHL and FHE by a quali-

fied trainer to specifically influence the independent variable. Participation was free of charge and included the requirement to participate in the experiment. It was also eligible for ECTS credits as part of an open course module. A total of 18 future professionals took part in the course and thus in the intervention group; another 18 formed the control group without treatment. While the HHL future professionals had an economics background, the FHE sample also included social studies. Due to the lack of a waiting list, randomization was not possible, which is why a nonequivalent control group design was chosen. However, propensity score matching was performed to reduce potential biases and to approximate the two groups. In addition, two measurement points (pre-/post-test) were collected to examine the effectiveness of the intervention compared to the control group. Mindfulness was assessed using the German version (Michalak et al., 2008) of the *Mindful Attention Awareness Scale* (Brown & Ryan, 2003), and sustainability-related attitudes were evaluated using the German translation (Rapior et al., 2021) of the *Attitudes toward Sustainable Development Scale* (Biasutti & Frate, 2016). Both scales were assessed for reliability, validity, and conceptual fit according to Robinson (2018). The intervention and control groups were analyzed separately and then compared using a paired t-test in SPSS Statistics.

The semi-structured interviews (Plietzsch et al., 2025, under review) aimed to find out what potential effects mindfulness practices can have on future

professionals and how these relate to the essential skills and attitudes for a sustainable future. In addition, the interviews were intended to provide information on expected barriers and critical success factors in the implementation of mindfulness practices. The sample comprised 16 interview partners, thereby achieving theoretical saturation (Gioia et al., 2013). The interviewees included teachers, certified mindfulness trainers, researchers, and student assistants. These individuals worked directly with the future professionals during the implementation and were also able to comment on the institutional requirements. The interviews were analyzed and coded in MAXQDA using the three-step procedure described by Gioia et al. (2013).

Approximately one month after the conclusion of the MBSR course, four digital focus groups were conducted with a total of 17 future professionals from the former course. These served to gain qualitative insights into their experiences and to develop student-centered ideas that cover their needs when implementing mindfulness practices at their own HEI. The sessions incorporated interactive components, including slider polls and scenario-based exercises, which were facilitated using *miro*. Therein, the focus groups served as a collective knowledge creation (Morgan, 1997), emphasizing the joint exploration of subjective meanings. In addition, a digital idea workshop was held with FHE and HHL staff. Building on their institutional knowledge, roles, and teaching experiences, the student-cente-

3 Transl.: Mindful Higher Education Institutions

4 Transl.: Institute for Mindfulness Connectedness Engagement

red ideas upon the implementation of mindfulness practices were assessed and prioritized. The combination of focus groups and the workshop follows an iterative understanding of qualitative data generation, as recommended in design-based research (McKenney & Reeves, 2018), whereby findings are continuously incorporated into the further course of the project. The results represented an extension to the previous quasi-experiment and semi-structured interviews, enriching the qualitative insights.

The objective of **work package four** was to synthesize all of the findings from work package three and translate them into **concrete implementation steps**

at HHL and FHE. This resulted in the development of an *InMind B-NEw* workbook, excerpts of which are shown in Figure 3. This workbook served as the basis for the subsequent mindfulness practices course with 23 future professionals.

Following the completion of the second course, another 19 future professionals participated in four focus groups, which aligned with the content of the first round of focus groups. Furthermore, an accompanying Instagram account was created, which can be accessed via the QR code in Figure 4. It served as part of the project's communication and dissemination strategy.

Finally, **work package five** represented the conclusion of the project. In this step, the gained insights were transferred into a **practical guideline** that can be used by other HEIs that wish to implement mindfulness practices. Therein, the *Design-Based Change Model* developed by Kang et al. (2020) was utilized to structure the critical success factors. This model is an iterative application of Kotter's (1997) change model, which has been adapted for HEIs, helping to surpass barriers.



Figure 3: Excerpts from the *InMind B-NEw* workbook. Source: Authors' own work.



Figure 4: Instagram account of *InMind B-NEw*. Source: Authors' own work.

5 Project Findings

5.1 Potential Effects of Mindfulness Practices on Future Professionals

The **quasi-experiment** and therein the MBSR course resulted in a significant ($p < 0.05$) increase in (1) **mindfulness** as well as (2) **attitudes toward sustainable development** from pre- to post-test among future professionals. According to Cohen (1992) the intervention had a medium effect size ($0.5 < d < 0.8$). In contrast, no significant difference was found among the control group from pre- to post-test (Plietzsch et al., 2024). Additionally, the **semi-structured interviews** frequently referred to six potential effects that were expected or perceived as a result of the implemented mindfulness practices, namely (3) **self-awareness and regulation**, (4) **stress resilience and well-being**, (5) **focus and productivity**, (6) **creativity and flexibility**, (7) **empathy and collaboration**, and (8) **ethics and sustainability** (Plietzsch et al., 2025, under review). The evaluation of the **focus groups**



Figure 5: Audio recordings of future professionals.
Source: Authors' own work.

confirmed these eight effects and further added to them (9) **purpose and meaning**.

These findings provide two insightful observations. (1) A comparison of these effects with the most recent IDG (IDG, 2025) as well as future skills (WEF, 2025a) framework reveals that many of the intrapersonal, value-based and social skills and attitudes with an emphasis on inner development may indeed be influenced by mindfulness practices. (2) Further, following the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (Staats, 2003), sustainable change and actions among future professionals may be predicted through the increase in attitudes toward sustainable development. Consequently, all these effects gained through mindfulness practices can play a pivotal role in a future professional's proactive contribution to a sustainable future and their own employability. The audio recordings in Figure 5 of future professionals that were part of a *InMind B-NEw* course offering provide additional qualitative insights into some of the potential effects. They can be accessed by scanning the QR code.

5.2 Barriers to the Implementation of Mindfulness Practices

Notwithstanding the potential effects, the implementation of mindfulness practices remains limited in HEIs. This phenomenon may be attributed to the following **three barriers**, which were identified through

the **semi-structured interviews** (Plietzsch et al., 2025, under review):

1. **lack of knowledge and inability to teach mindfulness**, including misconceptions about mindfulness (e.g. esotericism), poor communication of its effects, and a shortage of qualified trainers,
2. **lack of institutional commitment**, including absent leadership and resource support, low strategic priority, and no integration into academic structures,
3. **lack of implementation infrastructure**, including low individual commitment, missing competence networks, inappropriate or missing physical spaces, and the absence of dedicated formats and time slots as well as incentives such as ECTS.

5.3 Practical Guideline

Guided by the identified barriers, the **semi-structured interviews** additionally proposed **critical success factors** for implementing mindfulness practices in HEIs (Plietzsch et al., 2025, under review). The assessed **student-centered ideas** from the **focus groups** and **workshop** further added to these insights. The synthesis of these findings resulted in the development of a **practical guideline**, which is organized around the four-steps approach by Kang et al. (2020) and is illustrated in Table 1. Therein, each success factor is allocated to a specific barrier, as

Step

Critical Success Factors

(1) Vision:

Define a shared purpose by building a committed team, understanding the context and needs, and developing a clear vision and strategy for implementing mindfulness practices.

- Develop an evidence-based understanding of mindfulness practices by drawing on robust physiological and psychological research findings (B1)
- Use the CI approach to ensure that all relevant stakeholder groups are systematically brought into the process (B3)
- Engage motivated HEI staff, educators, and future professionals who can act as multipliers and support broader dissemination within the institution (B3)
- Qualify internal personnel through training and certification or collaborate with external experts to ensure high-quality delivery of mindfulness initiatives (B1)
- Take part in national networking activities to enable cross-institutional exchange, mutual learning, and the adaptation of proven best-practice models for implementing mindfulness practices (B3)
- Embed mindfulness practices within the institutional strategy by aligning them with existing priorities such as health promotion, learning development, or diversity initiatives (B2)

(2) Plan:

Lay the groundwork by developing knowledge around mindfulness practices, addressing concerns, and planning concrete steps while building support across the institution.

- Introduce small mindfulness impulses into everyday interactions such as conversations, meetings, workshops, lectures, information sessions, or trial offerings to gradually familiarize participants with the practice (B1)
- Leverage alumni, staff, or educators with prior mindfulness experience as central contributors who can share insights, initiate bottom-up activities, foster informal engagement, and create opportunities for encounters and exchange (B1) (B3)
- Respond to reservations or critique by providing theoretical grounding and illustrating successful applications through exemplary cases (B1)
- Substantiate the effectiveness of mindfulness initiatives by presenting evaluation results from course offerings (B1)
- Introduce mindfulness practices early in the student journey, for example during orientation or foundational courses, to establish participation as a natural and expected part of the learning environment (B3)
- Promote equal access by making mindfulness opportunities available to future professionals and staff from all academic backgrounds (B3)
- Secure active support from institutional leaders by encouraging top-down commitment, mentoring, and endorsement (B2)
- Allocate internal resources, such as health management funds, special project budgets, material support, study quality funds, or teaching hours, to sustain the implementation of mindfulness practices (B2)
- Pursue additional financial support through external funding sources, including government ministries, third-party project grants, or health insurance providers (B2)

Table 1: Practical guideline. Source: Authors' own work with reference to Kang et al.'s (2020) 'Design-Based-Change Model' (Kang et al., 2020) and initial implementation insights from Plietzsch et al.'s (2025, under review) work.

Step

Critical Success Factors

(3) Implement:

Put plans into action by delivering the mindfulness practices, overcoming barriers, and integrating mindfulness practices into daily campus life.

- Establish a vertically aligned educational pathway that integrates ongoing foundational mindfulness activities into the routines and cultural practices of campus life (B2)
- Enable practical entry points, such as trial sessions, informational flyers, videos, or welcome-package materials, to introduce new students to mindfulness practices (B3)
- Provide a diverse range of mindfulness-based formats with multiple engagement levels (introductory, advanced, self-paced) to accommodate varying needs, preferences, and time constraints (B3)
- Collaborate with external trainers or experts for delivery and credibility (B1)
- Maintain voluntary enrollment while requiring participation once registered, and offer recognition through credit points or certificates (B3)
- Allocate and equip a dedicated on-campus space specifically designed for mindfulness practice (B3)
- Ensure access to practice materials, such as audio recordings, written guides, or reflective journals, to enable independent engagement (B3)
- Establish clear contact points and visible support structures, including trained staff, peer mentors, or online platforms, to accompany participants throughout the process (B1) (B3)
- Draw on existing institutional resources, infrastructures, and systems to support the implementation (B2)
- Make use of internal and external communication channels to raise awareness and foster visibility of mindfulness initiatives (B1)

(4) Sustain:

Ensure long-term impact by evaluating outcomes, learning from feedback, and implementing mindfulness practices into the institutional culture for lasting change.

- Conduct evaluative measures such as pre- and post-test or quantitative course surveys to monitor outcomes (B1)
- Capture subjective developments through qualitative approaches, including interviews, focus groups, testimonials, or iterative feedback processes (B1)
- Use the collected evaluation data to iteratively refine and enhance the mindfulness practices (B2)
- Foster a community of practice to anchor mindfulness within the institutional culture and support its long-term sustainability (B2)

indicated by the number in italics (*B1–B3*). Based on the exploratory findings, this guideline is intended to provide other HEIs with practical insights into the potentially successful implementation of mindfulness practices within their own institutions. Therein, it may guide implementation depending on the own HEI context.

7 Conclusion and Outlook

The *InMind B-NEw* project suggests the potential of mindfulness practices as an innovative teaching concept to foster inner development by cultivating the essential skills and attitudes among future professionals to proactively contribute to a sustainable future. As indicated by the paper's title, the project's objective was to establish a *new* paradigm for *strong* higher education that prioritizes both information and cognitive-centric skills, as well as inner development, including intrapersonal, value-based and social skills and attitudes. Both pathways are equally essential for ensuring a sustainable future. The project setup, methodology, and findings outlined in this paper, which ultimately result in a practical guideline, may offer other HEIs an informed direction in implementing mindfulness practices at their own institution. After all, the CI approach employed in the project seemed to be effective in tailoring such concepts to the diverse realities of one's own HEI. Therein, the approach may be suitable – depending on

the own HEI context – as it promoted iterative, user-centered implementation throughout the methodological approaches, thereby fostering collaboration and knowledge dissemination between different stakeholders.

The explorative findings within *InMind B-NEw* suggest that mindfulness practices at HEIs may not only be regarded as a complementary component, but rather be viewed as a potentially strategic element in addressing the pressing demand for inner development among future professionals. Consequently, the implementation of mindfulness practices in HEIs may enhance not only the employability and well-being of future professionals but also the institutional relevance and sustainable impact. In a world that grows louder and more complex, a still and conscious mind may indeed be the most radical and necessary form of education.

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