A LIVING MINDFULNESS MODEL FOR HAPPY AND SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITIES: A TRANSFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The escalating mental health crisis and increasing disconnection within higher education institutions have exposed the limitations of current well-being interventions, which remain largely individualistic and therapeutic. This study introduces a novel paradigm, The Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities, which reframes Mindfulness not merely as a personal mental health practice but as an organisational development framework that fosters systemic well-being and institutional sustainability. Drawing upon applied Buddhist philosophy (interbeing, compassion, and non-self) and integrating insights from positive psychology and sustainability science, the model conceptualises Mindfulness through three interrelated pillars: Inner Transformation, Community Resilience, and Organisational-Ecological Embeddedness. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative data (n = 350) analysed using EFA, CFA, and SEM with qualitative insights derived from thematic coding of in-depth interviews with students, faculty, and administrators. The SEM analysis confirms significant causal pathways from Mindfulness to emotional well-being (β = 0.52), community engagement (β = 0.58), sustainability awareness (β = 0.61), and institutional loyalty (β = 0.50). Qualitative findings further illustrate how Mindfulness serves as a catalyst for both individual transformation and systemic cultural shifts within the university ecosystem. Theoretically, this research expands Mindfulness discourse by repositioning it as a systemic competency for organisational transformation. Practically, it offers a scalable framework for integrating Mindfulness into institutional governance, pedagogy, and campus design, advancing a regenerative vision of higher education aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This model offers a replicable pathway for universities in Southeast Asia and beyond. It supports educators, policy-makers, and students in fostering resilient, mindful, and sustainable educational communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) have faced a paradoxical crisis. While universities continue to serve as engines of intellectual progress and socioeconomic development, they are increasingly marked by rising levels of mental distress, burnout, and social alienation among both students and academic staff. Performance-driven cultures, institutional competitiveness, and fragmented community structures contribute significantly to this crisis, fostering environments that undermine emotional well-being and collective engagement (World Health Organization, 2022). Conventional responses, largely centred on stress-reduction programmes and therapeutic interventions, have struggled to address the structural and cultural underpinnings of this institutional malaise (Davidson & Kazniak, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2022). Amid these tensions, there has been a growing call to re-envision universities not merely as knowledge factories but as dynamic ecosystems of well-being, community, and sustainability. This paradigm shift is aligned with international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and Goal 4 (Quality Education), as well as the UNESCO so-called "Happy Schools" Framework, all of which prioritise holistic well-being as an essential indicator of educational success (UNESCO, 2016). Mindfulness, originating in Buddhist contemplative traditions, has increasingly been adopted in educational settings. However, its institutional integration remains largely limited to individual-focused stress reduction strategies, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Goyal et al., 2014). While these interventions yield tangible benefits at the individual level, they are rarely embedded into university governance, pedagogy, or spatial design (Hyland et al., 2015; Shinde et al., 2020). This study addresses a critical lacuna in the literature: the absence of a systemic, institutionalised Mindfulness framework capable of permeating the structural, cultural, and ecological dimensions of higher education. In response, we propose the Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities: a transformative paradigm that reconceptualises Mindfulness not as a solitary psychological practice but as a regenerative organisational capacity. This model draws upon applied Buddhist philosophy, particularly Thích Nhất Hạnh's notions of interbeing, non-self, and compassion (Hanh, 1999), and is theoretically enriched by insights from positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) and sustainability science (Fischer et al., 2017; Thiermann & Sheate, 2022). It operationalises Mindfulness through three interrelated dimensions: (1) Inner Transformation, focusing on personal emotional well-being and self-regulation; (2) Community Resilience, fostering empathy, mutual support, and collective care; and (3) Organisational–Ecological Embeddedness, embedding Mindfulness practices into institutional culture, leadership, and spatial organisation. Methodologically, the research adopts a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were gathered from 350 participants involved in Mindfulness programmes and analysed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The model yielded robust pathways: Mindfulness significantly predicted emotional well-being (β = 0.52), community engagement (β = 0.58), sustainability awareness (β = 0.61), and institutional loyalty (β = 0.50). These results were triangulated with thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with students, faculty, and administrators, which revealed Mindfulness as a cultural catalyst for individual and institutional transformation. Despite the global spread of Mindfulness, Southeast Asian HEIs, ironically rooted in Buddhist cultures, have yet to systematically institutionalise Mindfulness as an educational framework. While universities in Thailand (e.g., Mahidol University), Myanmar (e.g., Sitagu International Buddhist Academy), and India (e.g., Nalanda University) have developed Mindfulness-informed curricula, such practices remain largely siloed within departments of religious studies. This study addresses that regional and epistemological gap by reframing Mindfulness as an applied educational philosophy aligned with Buddhist ethics and soteriology. Ultimately, the Living Mindfulness Model advances a cyclical, holistic, and scalable approach to educational transformation. It provides a theoretical and practical roadmap for integrating Mindfulness into the institutional DNA of universities, thus fostering regenerative learning ecosystems aligned with the SDGs. In doing so, this work contributes to a growing body of scholarship reimagining the university as a mindful and sustainable community of care.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. *From Mindfulness as Therapy to Mindfulness as an Organisational Paradigm*

Originally rooted in contemplative Buddhist traditions, Mindfulness has transcended its religious origins to become a widely adopted concept in educational, organisational, and sustainability discourses worldwide. Contemporary applications primarily frame Mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), targeting stress relief, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility (Crane et al., 2023; Felver & Wang, 2024; Dionne, 2016). Despite this widespread therapeutic adaptation, Mindfulness retains deep philosophical roots in Buddhism. Thích Nhất Hạnh, a central figure in modern Buddhist thought, conceptualised Mindfulness not merely as a psychological technique but as a comprehensive mode of being grounded in interbeing, compassion, non-self (anatta), and emptiness (śūnyatā) (Hanh, 1999; Kirmayer, 2015). The principle of interbeing, which posits that nothing exists in isolation but in dynamic interdependence, aligns closely with systems thinking, a paradigm essential for understanding socio-ecological complexity (Bauer et al., 2021; Sanyal & Rigg, 2020). While the secularisation of Mindfulness has broadened accessibility, it has often diluted these foundational philosophical insights. Nevertheless, organisational theorists have expanded Mindfulness into the institutional domain. Notably, Vogus and Sutcliffe (2012) introduced the concept of Organisational Mindfulness, an institution's collective ability to detect and respond to weak signals of disruption, operationalised through five key processes: preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise. However, most Mindfulness practices in higher education remain confined to individual stress management and mental health programmes, with little integration into governance structures, leadership, curricular innovation, or institutional sustainability strategies (Bauer et al., 2021; Felver & Wang, 2024). This gap signals the need for a paradigm shift, from Mindfulness as a personal coping mechanism to Mindfulness as an organisational development framework, essential for cultivating Sustainability-Oriented Universities (SOUs).

2.2. The Nexus of Well-being Science and Sustainable Development

The intersection of Mindfulness, well-being science, and sustainability represents a critical frontier in educational research and practice. Positive psychology, particularly Seligman's PERMA model, encompassing Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment, offers a structured framework for conceptualising well-being in learning environments (Seligman, 2011). In parallel, UNESCO's so-called "Happy Schools" Framework (2016) advances a vision in which happiness, empathy, inclusion, and community belonging are central to educational success. Yet, both models tend to treat well-being as a fixed outcome rather than a dynamic, regenerative process embedded in institutional culture and governance systems. Crucially, these frameworks often neglect the spiritual and existential dimensions central to Buddhist philosophy, impermanence, non-attachment, and compassionate action, which are critical to fostering resilience in a world facing climate crises, biodiversity loss, and socio-political instability (Hanh, 1999; Kirmayer, 2015). This broader view reframes well-being from an individualistic pursuit into a shared ecological and ethical imperative. The challenge intensifies when considering how universities engage with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (United Nations, 2015). Many institutions adopt SDGs in a technocratic manner, focusing on external performance metrics while overlooking internal capacities such as Mindfulness, emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and resilience (Bauer et al., 2021; Siqueira & Pitassi, 2016). Addressing these deficiencies calls for a unified conceptual model that integrates Mindfulness, well-being, and sustainability as a regenerative foundation for higher education transformation.

2.3. Mindfulness and Sustainability-Oriented Universities

Recent research affirms that Mindfulness is a critical enabler of Sustainability-Oriented Universities (SOUs). Bauer et al. (2021) emphasise that sustainability governance is often superficial unless underpinned by transformational mindsets, resilient institutional cultures, and ethically grounded leadership. Mindfulness nurtures not only personal well-being but also the organisational capacities necessary for embedding sustainability at the core of institutional missions. Specifically, it cultivates: Systems Thinking Competence: the ability to perceive and respond to complex interdependencies in socio-ecological systems (Bauer et al., 2021). Normative Competence: critical reflection on values, ethics, and sustainability goals

(Siqueira & Pitassi, 2016). Strategic Competence: collaborative capacity to design and implement sustainability transitions (Fischer et al., 2017). Anticipatory Competence: the foresight to envision desirable futures and prepare for uncertainty (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012). Empirical studies show that Mindfulness enhances adaptive capacity, emotional resilience, and pro-environmental behaviours among students and academic staff alike (Ramos-Monsivais et al., 2024; Vidal-Melía et al., 2022). These competencies are indispensable for advancing the SDGs through higher education.

2.4. *Mindfulness, Leadership and Transformative Learning*

Mindfulness has increasingly been integrated into transformative leadership and regenerative learning frameworks. Sanyal and Rigg (2020) argue that Mindfulness-based leadership cultivates metacognitive and emotional capacities, attentional control, emotional regulation, compassionate empathy, and moral clarity that are essential for navigating the ambiguity and complexity inherent in sustainability transitions. Vogus and Sutcliffe's (2012) concept of mindful organising shifts attention from static organisational traits to dynamic, relational processes. Such organisations exhibit heightened situational awareness, context sensitivity, and flexible, relational responsiveness, key features for institutional resilience and learning. This organisational view echoes the Buddhist concept of interbeing, in which leadership is relational rather than positional, emerging from empathy, interconnectedness, and collective wisdom (Hanh, 1999). Leadership becomes distributed and embedded in community practice rather than confined to hierarchical authority. At the pedagogical level, Mindfulness fosters transformative learning by enabling learners to move beyond reductionist paradigms toward systems thinking and ethical reflection (Lomas, 2017). This approach aligns with UNESCO's vision of education that integrates cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural dimensions to prepare students as sustainability change agents (UNESCO, 2016).

2.5. *Mindfulness-Centered Educational Philosophy in Buddhist Institutions*

The Living Mindfulness Model resonates with the Mahāyāna tradition's emphasis on bodhicitta (compassionate awakening) and the Zen approach to direct experience. Yet, it also echoes Theravāda's cultivation of sati and the Trúc Lâm tradition's integration of Mindfulness into daily lay practice,

offering a hybrid model responsive to contemporary Southeast Asian university contexts.

Buddhist institutions provide instructive examples:

The Plum Village tradition embraces an "Interbeing Education" model that embeds Mindfulness in all aspects of learning.

Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (Taiwan) promotes "Right Mindfulness Pedagogy," integrating meditation with ethical inquiry and community service.

Mahidol University (Thailand), Sitagu International Buddhist Academy (Myanmar), and Nalanda University (India) offer culturally rooted models combining contemplative learning with sustainability.

Beyond Buddhism, various religious traditions and secular institutions have begun incorporating Mindfulness into pedagogy:

Jesuit universities (e.g., Georgetown) integrate Ignatian contemplation with Mindfulness for ethical discernment. Islamic schools in Indonesia have adapted Mindfulness as murāqabah (spiritual vigilance). Jewish spiritual education includes hitbodedut, resembling Mindfulness through personal reflection. Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) applies Mindfulness through neuroscience and compassion-based ethics. Oxford Mindfulness Centre develops secular MBCT programs while still engaging Buddhist source texts. These models reveal a growing convergence between ancient spiritual practices and contemporary educational goals, yet few models are fully rooted in a Buddhist ontological worldview as the Living Mindfulness Model aspires to be.

2.6. *Research Gaps and Theoretical Model Proposal*

Identified gaps in the literature despite recent advancements, several critical gaps persist in Mindfulness and sustainability research within higher education:

1. Governance integration deficit: Mindfulness remains marginal in institutional governance, rarely embedded in leadership structures or strategic decision-making (Bauer et al., 2021; Sanyal & Rigg, 2020).
2. Disconnection from systems thinking: Current Mindfulness practices lack alignment with systems thinking frameworks fundamental to sustainability transformation (Fischer et al., 2017).
3. Static well-being models: Prevailing well-

being frameworks treat well-being as a final outcome rather than a cyclical, embedded institutional process (Seligman, 2011; UNESCO, 2016).

Conceptual Contribution: The Living Mindfulness Model

To address these gaps, this study proposes the Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities, an integrative, regenerative framework embedding Mindfulness across three interdependent domains:

Inner transformation: Cultivating Mindfulness, compassion, and non-self as the foundation for personal resilience, mental well-being, and ethical clarity. Community resilience: Strengthening

empathy, solidarity, and collaborative problem-solving to build compassionate university ecosystems.

Organisational-Ecological embeddedness: Aligning institutional governance, curriculum design, and campus environments with regenerative sustainability and systems thinking principles. This model serves as both a conceptual bridge and operational framework, linking Buddhist philosophical insights with contemporary systems science. It reframes Mindfulness as a strategic, systemic, and regenerative competency, rather than a stand-alone psychological intervention.

Figure 1: The Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities.

This diagram illustrates the conceptual framework of the Living Mindfulness Model, integrating three interdependent domains: Inner Transformation, Community Resilience, and Ecological and Organisational Embeddedness. At the core lies Mindfulness as a generative force, fostering systemic regeneration through cyclical feedback loops. Each domain reflects a key dimension of Buddhist philosophical ethics and contemporary sustainability science: (1) Inner Transformation cultivates compassion, interbeing, and non-self; (2) Community Resilience supports collective empathy, engagement, and institutional belonging; (3) Organisational Embeddedness aligns policy, pedagogy, and campus environments with ecological consciousness. The model conceptualises well-being not as a static outcome but as a regenerative, interconnected process at the heart of sustainable higher education.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to validate the Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities. The methodological framework is

rooted in the epistemology of interbeing derived from Buddhist systems thinking, particularly Thích Nhất Hạnh's doctrine of interdependence and collective awakening (Hanh, 1999). This paradigm shifts the understanding of Mindfulness from an individual practice to a systemic competency that catalyses cultural transformation within higher education institutions. It enables universities to cultivate emotional resilience, community solidarity, and sustainability consciousness across multiple stakeholder layers.

3.1. Research Design

The mixed-methods design integrates two complementary phases. The quantitative phase uses Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine hypothesised causal relationships between latent constructs. The qualitative phase follows, providing ontological and contextual depth via thematic coding of in-depth interviews. This explanatory sequence ensures methodological triangulation while remaining consistent with Buddhist epistemology, which values intersubjective coherence, lived insight, and recursive validation.

3.2. Survey Instrument Development

Measurement Constructs and Operationalisation
The survey instrument synthesised validated scales from four interdisciplinary domains: Mindfulness research, Buddhist philosophy, positive psychology, and sustainability science.

Five constructs were operationalized:

Table 1: Measurement Constructs and Sources.

Construct	Code Range	Items	Sources
Mindfulness Practice	M1-M5	5	Kabat-Zinn (2003); Crane et al. (2023)
Emotional Well-being	E1-E5	5	Seligman (2011); Fredrickson (2004)
Community Engagement	C1-C4	4	Sanyal & Rigg (2020); UNESCO (2016)
Sustainability Awareness	S1-S4	4	Bauer et al. (2021); Fischer et al. (2017)
Institutional Loyalty	L1-L3	3	Vogus & Sutcliffe (2012); OECD (2022)

3.2.1. Questionnaire Structure

The structured questionnaire consisted of six sections: demographic information, Mindfulness practices, emotional well-being, community engagement, sustainability awareness, and institutional loyalty. All items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's α ranging from 0.78 to 0.91.

3.2.2. Scaling and Translation

The original instrument was created in English and translated into Vietnamese using Brislin's (1970) back-translation method to ensure semantic equivalence. A pilot test with 30 participants confirmed item clarity and reliability. Participants were grouped into three strata based on Mindfulness exposure (low, moderate, high) to allow subgroup comparisons.

3.3. Qualitative Inquiry: Coding Framework and Thematic Analysis

3.3.1. Sampling and Interview Protocol

A purposive sample of 25 participants from the survey cohort was selected, ensuring variation by gender, academic role, and Mindfulness exposure. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) explored the lived experience of Mindfulness and its relationship to well-being, community, and sustainability.

3.3.2. Thematic coding and MAXQDA Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Coding was performed with MAXQDA 2022. Five dominant themes emerged:

1. Inner Transformation (resilience, emotional regulation, clarity)
2. Community Resilience (mutual support, empathy, co-regulation)
3. Organisational-Ecological Embedding (curriculum, governance, design)
4. Sustainability Mindset (systems thinking, ecological ethics)
5. Implementation Barriers (institutional resistance, policy fragmentation)

Thematic saturation was reached by the 22nd interview, confirming data adequacy.

3.4. Sampling Strategy

Quantitative phase
Population: students, faculty, and staff in Mindfulness and sustainability programmes
Sample size: 350 (sufficient for SEM; Hair et al., 2019)
Sampling method: purposive with demographic balance
Response rate: 82.4%
Qualitative phase
Participants: 25 selected from the survey cohort
Method: maximum variation sampling by gender, role, Mindfulness experience

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

Surveys were distributed online over four weeks. Interviews were conducted in-person or via Zoom, recorded with consent, and anonymised. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Written and digital informed consent was secured.

3.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis
Descriptive statistics and EFA were conducted in SPSS 26. CFA and SEM were conducted in AMOS 26.
Model Fit Summary:

Table 2: Model Fit Summary.

Index	Threshold	Model Value	Interpretation
x^2/df	< 3	2.163	Acceptable
CFI	> 0.90	0.948	Excellent
TLI	> 0.90	0.932	Excellent
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.049	Good
SRMR	< 0.08	0.041	Excellent

Reliability and Validity:
Cronbach's α: 0.78–0.91

CR > 0.88; AVE > 0.60
Fornell-Larcker criterion met for all constructs
SEM Hypothesis Testing Results:

Table 3: SEM Hypothesis Testing Results.

Hypothesis	Pathway	β	p-value	Supported
H1	Mindfulness → Emotional Well-being	0.71	<0.001	Yes
H2	Mindfulness → Community Engagement	0.65	<0.001	Yes
H3	Community Engagement + Mindfulness → Sustainability Awareness	0.58	<0.001	Yes
H4	Sustainability Awareness → Institutional Loyalty	0.62	<0.001	Yes

3.6.1. Qualitative Ttriangulation and Integration

Qualitative themes mirrored SEM constructs, affirming conceptual coherence. Inner transformation and community resilience directly supported measured outcomes, while implementation barriers contextualised institutional constraints.

3.7. Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

The following table summarises the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness criteria applied in this study, alongside ethical considerations that ensured methodological integrity and participant protection.

Table 4: Mixed-Methods Validity and Reliability Summary.

Dimension	Quantitative	Qualitative
Reliability	Cronbach's α = 0.78–0.91	Inter-coder agreement; codebook validation
Construct Validity	AVE > 0.60; CR > 0.88	Theme triangulation with SEM
Discriminant Validity	Fornell–Larcker confirmed	Peer debriefing; reflexive journaling
Credibility	Excellent model fit	Member checking; thematic saturation
Transferability	Representative sample	Context-rich narratives

3.7.1. Ethical Considerations

IRB approval obtained
Written and digital informed consent collected
Anonymity and data protection ensured
Participation was voluntary with withdrawal rights.

3.8. Summary

This methodology section articulates a rigorous, interdisciplinary design rooted in Buddhist systems thinking and empirically validated by mixed-methods inquiry. The findings, presented next, confirm the Living Mindfulness Model as a viable, scalable, and ethically grounded framework for fostering emotional well-being, social cohesion, and sustainability awareness in higher education.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Overview of Analytical Strategy

This section presents the empirical outcomes of the study based on the sequential explanatory design detailed in Section 3. The analytical strategy commenced with quantitative testing via Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), which served to validate the hypothesised relationships embedded within the Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities. Subsequently, qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed and triangulated with statistical results to enrich interpretive insight and ensure ecological validity. This approach ensured a recursive and coherent empirical validation of the model aligned with Buddhist systems ontology.

4.2. Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics and diagnostic overview
A total of 350 valid responses were collected, achieving a response rate of 82.4%. Initial diagnostics revealed no significant missing data or multivariate outliers. All variables met thresholds for skewness and kurtosis (within ±2), supporting assumptions of normality. The demographic distribution was balanced: 52% of respondents were female, and 60% reported prior engagement with Mindfulness activities. These metrics supported both the generalisability and internal validity of the sample.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)
EFA using Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation confirmed the presence of five latent constructs consistent with the theoretical framework:
1. Mindfulness Practice
2. Emotional Well-being
3. Community Engagement
4. Sustainability Awareness
5. Institutional Loyalty

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.853, indicating meritorious factorability. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1954.23$, df = 300, p < 0.001). All items loaded above 0.70 onto their respective factors with no notable cross-loadings, confirming strong construct validity.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

CFA verified the structural integrity and reliability of the model. Composite Reliability (CR) exceeded 0.88 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was above 0.60 for all constructs, satisfying convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

CFA Model Fit Indices:

CFI = 0.948 (Excellent)

TLI = 0.932 (Excellent)

RMSEA = 0.049 (Good)

SRMR = 0.041 (Excellent)

These indices provide robust evidence for the model's measurement adequacy and confirm its theoretical coherence.

Structural equation modelling (SEM)

SEM was employed to test the hypothesised pathways. All path coefficients were statistically significant at p < 0.001. The model demonstrated excellent fit, consistent with CFA results.

Table 5: SEM Path Analysis Results.

Hypothesis	Pathway	β	t-value	p-value	Supported	SDG Alignment
H1	Mindfulness → Emotional Well-being	0.71	15.78	<0.001	Yes	SDG 3
H2	Mindfulness → Community Engagement	0.65	13.54	<0.001	Yes	SDG 4
H3	(Mindfulness + Community) → Sustainability Awareness	0.58	11.37	<0.001	Yes	SDG 11
H4	Sustainability Awareness → Institutional Loyalty	0.62	10.92	<0.001	Yes	SDG 16

These results empirically validate the theoretical model and demonstrate that Mindfulness exerts a significant, cascading influence on individual, communal, and institutional outcomes.

4.3. Qualitative Analysis

4.3.1. Emergent Themes

Thematic analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews, conducted using MAXQDA, yielded five core themes:

Inner transformation (92%): Participants described enhanced clarity, emotional regulation, and resilience.

Community resilience (84%): Narratives revealed stronger interpersonal empathy and support systems.

Sustainability awareness (76%): A link emerged between personal Mindfulness and environmental responsibility.

Organisational embeddedness (68%): Participants discussed integration of Mindfulness into institutional policies, curriculum, and spatial design.

Implementation barriers (54%): Cultural resistance and fragmented policies were noted as hindrances.

These themes were reinforced by participant quotations directly aligned with SEM pathways. For instance:

Student #5: "Mindfulness helps me stay centred during stress." (Supports H1)

Faculty #3: "People listen more deeply now, it's changed our culture." (Supports H2)

Narrative Dynamics and Cultural Cycles

Qualitative narratives indicated recursive dynamics: Mindfulness practice fosters emotional balance, which enhances community cohesion, which in turn reinforces Mindfulness. These mutually reinforcing cycles mirror the feedback loops depicted in the Living Mindfulness Model and align with Buddhist notions of interbeing. Participants consistently emphasised the necessity of leadership commitment and cultural embedding for sustainable impact.

4.4. Mixed-Methods Triangulation and SDG Mapping

Thematic convergence across methods reinforced the model's ecological validity. Quantitative findings were substantiated by qualitative narratives, confirming Mindfulness as a driver of systemic transformation. This model operationalises four Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being (via H1)

SDG 4: Quality Education (via H2)

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities (via H3)

SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (via H4)

The SDG alignment underscores the broader societal and policy relevance of the model.

4.5. Summary of Key Findings

The results validate the structural, theoretical, and ecological integrity of the Living Mindfulness Model. Quantitative evidence confirms that Mindfulness significantly enhances emotional well-being, community engagement, sustainability awareness, and institutional loyalty. Meanwhile, qualitative insights reveal dynamic and recursive cultural mechanisms that underpin these relationships. Together, the mixed-methods findings establish a multidimensional and replicable framework for advancing holistic sustainability in higher education,

grounded in Buddhist epistemology and global development goals.

The implications of these findings are further explored in Section 5 (Discussion).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Interpretation of Key Quantitative Findings

The Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) results provide compelling evidence for the validity and internal coherence of the Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities. The path coefficient linking Mindfulness Practice to Emotional Well-being ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrates that Mindfulness is a fundamental determinant of emotional regulation and psychological resilience among university stakeholders. This statistically robust relationship is congruent with Buddhist understandings of Mindfulness as an ontological stance of awareness and presence, as articulated by Thích Nhất Hạnh (1999), who describes Mindfulness as the capacity to touch the present moment deeply and non-reactively. The significant link between Mindfulness Practice and Community Engagement ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$) further underscores Mindfulness as an inherently relational force. This finding extends prior research that has focused primarily on intrapersonal effects (e.g., Felver & Wang, 2024; Dionne, 2016) by empirically validating Mindfulness as a vector for prosocial behaviours, empathy, and active listening. These capacities are central to the Buddhist doctrine of interbeing and to contemporary leadership theories that emphasise compassionate governance and collective flourishing (Bauer et al., 2021). Equally important is the mediated path from Mindfulness and Community Engagement to Sustainability Awareness ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$), which signals a shift from ego-centric to eco-centric epistemologies. This confirms emerging claims within sustainability science that link inner transformation to planetary stewardship (Fischer et al., 2017; Thiermann & Sheate, 2022).

Mindfulness, when cultivated communally, facilitates awareness of systemic interdependence, thereby nurturing a consciousness attuned to sustainability. Finally, the relationship between Sustainability Awareness and Institutional Loyalty ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that values-based alignment significantly enhances organisational commitment. This finding supports Vogus & Sutcliffe's (2012) assertion that when institutional ethos and personal values converge, affective commitment and retention are strengthened. Collectively, these empirical results validate the model's foundational assumption that Mindfulness is not only a personal competency but also an organisational catalyst.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions and Model Validation

5.2.1. Extending Mindfulness beyond Individualism

The study contributes to Mindfulness literature by repositioning Mindfulness beyond individual-centric paradigms such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). While such models have been valuable for mental health, they often decontextualise Mindfulness from its ethical and systemic roots. The present model reframes Mindfulness as a socio-ecological and institutional capacity, extending its utility to educational governance, cultural design, and community resilience (Crane et al., 2023; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012).

5.2.2. Bridging Mindfulness and Sustainability Science

Another significant contribution lies in bridging Mindfulness and sustainability. Although this conceptual linkage has been posited by numerous theorists, empirical validations remain sparse. This study operationalises that bridge, showing that Mindfulness enhances sustainability awareness when embedded within relational and institutional structures. This aligns with Ramos-Monsivais et al. (2024), who argue for integrating transformative learning with ecological ethics in higher education.

5.2.3. Validating the Regenerative Feedback Loop

Qualitative data support a regenerative feedback cycle: Mindfulness practice enhances emotional well-being, which reinforces Mindfulness, fostering deeper community engagement and institutional integration. This recursive loop echoes the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising (pratītyasamutpāda), wherein causes and conditions mutually reinforce one another. It also resonates with the emerging paradigm of regenerative education (Thiermann & Sheate, 2022), offering a cyclical rather than linear view of educational transformation.

5.3. Insights from Qualitative Findings

5.3.1. Lived Experience of Inner Transformation

Interview narratives confirmed the quantitative finding that Mindfulness enhances emotional resilience. Students and faculty described experiences of heightened clarity, reduced anxiety,

and greater equanimity. These narratives enrich the statistical results, revealing Mindfulness as a lived, transformative experience that fosters mental balance and spiritual depth.

5.3.2. Cultivating a Mindful Community

Participants consistently described a cultural shift from transactional to relational modes of interaction. Enhanced empathy, deep listening, and mutual support were frequently cited, mirroring Thích Nhất Hạnh's vision of a "beloved community" and aligning with UNESCO's so-called "Happy Schools" framework (UNESCO, 2016). These findings underscore the role of Mindfulness in cultivating relational infrastructure that transcends curriculum and pedagogy.

5.3.3. Organisational Embeddedness

Mindfulness was viewed not merely as an individual practice but as an organisational ethos embedded in policy, leadership, and spatial design. Examples included mindful leadership training,

silent zones, and integration of Mindfulness into general education curricula. Such structural embedding supports calls for Mindful Universities and reinforces the model's systemic applicability (Bauer et al., 2021).

5.4. Comparative Analysis with Global Models

The Living Mindfulness Model offers a distinctively Southeast Asian contribution to global contemplative education. In Bhutan, Gross National Happiness (GNH) principles are integrated into academic life (Ura et al., 2012); in Japan, contemplative initiatives support health promotion. Western models such as Brown University's Contemplative Studies or Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center emphasise individual well-being. In contrast, our model blends Vietnamese Zen (Trúc Lâm) philosophy with systems thinking to offer a holistic, scalable framework grounded in spiritual depth and governance logic.

5.5. Integration with Existing Literature

Table 6: Theoretical Convergence and Knowledge Extension.

Domain	Convergence with Literature	Extension of Knowledge
Mindfulness	Validates MBSR/ACT for personal well-being	Positions mindfulness as socio-institutional capacity
Sustainability	Confirms link to eco-awareness and inner development	Demonstrates pathway to institutional loyalty
Higher Education	Aligns with Happy Schools & ESD (UNESCO, 2016)	Offers regenerative loop embedded in campus governance

5.6. Practical Implications

5.6.1. University Governance

Universities should incorporate Mindfulness into leadership training, governance structures, and institutional strategy. Doing so enhances cultural coherence and facilitates systemic change aligned with sustainability goals.

5.6.2. Curriculum Design

Mindfulness should be introduced as a transversal skill across disciplines. Courses in sustainability, ethics, psychology, and management can benefit from integrating contemplative practices.

5.6.3. Campus Design

Architectural spaces should be intentionally designed to reflect Mindfulness, such as creating silence zones, nature integration, and community gardens. These design elements reinforce behavioural patterns and support psychological well-being.

5.6.4. Leadership Development

Training future leaders in mindful governance can replace control-based paradigms with compassionate stewardship. This shift in leadership style can catalyse institutional transformation from within.

5.7. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data and its single-institutional scope. Social desirability bias and contextual specificity may affect generalisability. Future research should explore cross-cultural validation, longitudinal impact, and simulation via agent-based models to understand how Mindfulness initiatives scale across systems.

5.8. Summary of Contributions

The Living Mindfulness Model advances a multi-layered, empirically validated, and culturally grounded framework for cultivating sustainable universities. By integrating Buddhist philosophy, systems theory, and educational praxis, the model contributes to ongoing dialogues on holistic development, ecological ethics, and transformative

governance.

Table 7: Summary of Hypotheses and SDG Linkages.

Hypothesis	Pathway	β	Significance	Related SDG
H1	Mindfulness Practice → Emotional Well-being	≥ 0.40	Significant	SDG 3
H2	Mindfulness Practice → Community Engagement	≥ 0.35	Significant	SDG 4
H3	Well-being & Community → Sustainability Awareness	≥ 0.30	Significant	SDG 11
H4	Sustainability Awareness → Institutional Loyalty	≥ 0.30	Significant	SDG 16

5.9. Global Buddhist Higher Education Integration

Leading institutions such as Harvard Divinity School, Nalanda University, and Dharma Drum Institute have made strides in integrating Mindfulness into curriculum and campus life. Our model adds to this trajectory by foregrounding Vietnamese Zen (Trúc Lâm) principles and offering a culturally rooted yet globally scalable blueprint for designing happy and sustainable universities. It bridges ontology and governance, proposing a new paradigm of education grounded in presence, compassion, and interdependence.

Figure 2: The Living Mindfulness Model: Regenerative Feedback Loop for Happy and Sustainable Universities.

This diagram illustrates the systemic relationships validated in the SEM analysis: Mindfulness Practice → Emotional Well-being → Community Engagement → Sustainability Awareness → Institutional Loyalty. The cyclical arrows denote a regenerative feedback loop, aligning with Buddhist concepts of interbeing and systems theory. 5.10 Core innovation and Philosophical distinction of the model. At the heart of the Living Mindfulness Model lies a fundamental epistemological shift: Mindfulness is no longer confined to a personal therapeutic domain but is repositioned as the ethical and operational core of organisational transformation. This reconfiguration reflects the insight that individual flourishing and institutional well-being are inseparable, that a happy person is the

seed of a sustainable institution. Drawing upon Buddhist principles such as non-self (anattā) and interbeing, the model affirms that authentic education is not merely about knowledge transmission but about cultivating ethical awareness, relational intelligence and ecological responsibility. By placing Mindfulness at the structural centre of campus life, through leadership, pedagogy, space, and policy, the model generates a regenerative loop of inner and outer change. This convergence between personal happiness and institutional sustainability represents a significant departure from conventional well-being models that focus on stress reduction. It offers instead a normative, systemic, and intercultural philosophy of education, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 3, SDG 4, and SDG 16), and contributes a unique voice from Southeast Asian Buddhist thought to global discourses on education and development.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

This study introduces a novel, empirically validated and theoretically grounded framework: the Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities. Diverging from traditional interpretations of Mindfulness as a personal therapeutic tool, this research reconceptualises Mindfulness as an organisational paradigm embedded within the cultural, ecological, and governance structures of higher education institutions. The validated structural pathways: Mindfulness Practice → Emotional Well-being → Community Engagement → Sustainability Awareness → Institutional Loyalty—demonstrate that Mindfulness transcends individual practice, serving as a systemic catalyst for institutional transformation. The regenerative feedback loop, evidenced through SEM and supported by qualitative narratives, illustrates how inner transformation fosters community resilience, which in turn cultivates ecological awareness and reinforces

institutional commitment. The Regenerative Feedback Loop of the Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities. This visual representation integrates Mindfulness practice with emotional well-being, community engagement, sustainability awareness, and institutional loyalty, capturing the dynamic, cyclical, and systemic nature of transformative educational ecosystems. This paradigm moves beyond the static constructs of "so-called "so-called "Happy Schools" or performance-centric universities, proposing instead a living ecosystem rooted in spiritual ecology, interbeing, and regenerative sustainability. The model operationalises key Buddhist philosophical tenets such as Interbeing, Non-self (Anattā), and Compassionate Action, integrating them with systems thinking and sustainability science to transform universities into ethical and mindful ecosystems. At the heart of this study lies a transformative proposition: Mindfulness is not merely a psychological state or stress-reduction technique, but a living epistemology and organisational philosophy. By positioning Mindfulness as the core from which both personal transformation and institutional change radiate, the model reveals that the happiness of individuals is inherently intertwined with the flourishing of the organisation. This symbiotic dynamic aligns education with the deeper aims of ethical development, spiritual ecology, and sustainable planetary well-being, marking a shift from performance-based to purpose-driven universities.

6.2. Toward a Mindfulness-Centered Educational Philosophy

At the heart of this model is an emergent educational philosophy that views Mindfulness not merely as a technique but as a foundational epistemology. Education, in this vision, is not solely about cognitive skill acquisition but the cultivation of ethical discernment, emotional intelligence, ecological awareness, and interbeing. Globally, this vision resonates with Buddhist institutions such as the University of the West (USA), SOAS (UK), Nalanda (India), Mahachulalongkorn (Thailand), Sitagu (Myanmar), Fo Guang (Taiwan), and Kelaniya (Sri Lanka), where Mindfulness is both a contemplative practice and a pedagogical method. Secular institutions like Harvard, Stanford, Oxford, Monash, and Tokyo University have also incorporated Mindfulness-based programs to cultivate well-being and ethical leadership. These developments signal a convergence across traditions, highlighting Mindfulness as an intercultural, interfaith educational resource. This model thus envisions a regenerative feedback loop where mindful individuals contribute to mindful communities, which in turn foster institutional cultures oriented toward planetary well-being. A Mindfulness-centered educational philosophy offers a coherent, compassionate framework for 21st-century transformative learning.

6.3. Theoretical Contributions Contpractical Contributions

Reframes Mindfulness from a therapeutic practice to a living organisational paradigm. Extends the UNESCO so-called "Happy Schools" and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) models by integrating spiritual ecology and community resilience. Bridges Mindfulness studies, systems theory, and sustainability science into a unified model of institutional transformation. The model offers a blueprint for higher education institutions transitioning from performance-based models to those centered on systemic well-being and sustainability. Key applications include:

Governance: Embedding Mindfulness in leadership training, decision-making, and organisational culture.

Curriculum: Integrating Mindfulness, sustainability, and systems thinking across disciplines.

Campus design: Creating physical spaces that support Mindfulness (e.g., meditation zones, eco-architecture).

Human resources: Developing evaluation and training frameworks based on mindful leadership and collective well-being.

Organisational culture: Reinforcing empathy, compassion, and interconnectedness as institutional values.

Table 8: Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implementations.

Domain	Theoretical Contribution	Practical Implementation
Governance	Mindfulness as organisational ethic	Training in mindful leadership
Curriculum	Contemplative epistemology & ethical pedagogy	Integrating into cross-disciplinary modules
Spatial Design	Ecological embodiment of values	Eco-architecture, silence zones
Human Resources	Compassion as leadership competence	HR frameworks for emotional intelligence
Policy	Structural well-being paradigm vs. fragmented response	Policy realignment aligned with SDGs

6.4. Academic Implications

This is the first model to formally conceptualise Mindfulness as an institutional ecosystem.

Establishes an interdisciplinary bridge between Buddhist philosophy, systems science, organisational psychology, and sustainability studies.

Contributes to discourses in transformative education, regenerative leadership, and sustainable development.

6.5. Policy Implications

Advocates for a policy shift from fragmented mental health interventions to systemic well-being frameworks.

Encourages adoption of Mindfulness as a structural foundation in higher education policy.

Aligns with SDGs, especially SDG 3 (Good Health), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 17 (Global Partnerships).

6.6. Practice Implications

Teacher Training: Embedding Mindfulness in educator training for holistic well-being.

Leadership Development: Cultivating ethical and mindful governance competencies.

Curriculum Innovation: Integrating Mindfulness into sustainability, ethics, and emotional learning modules.

Student Programs: Moving beyond stress relief to fostering meaning, purpose, and community.

6.7. Future Directions

Cross-cultural validation: Testing the model in diverse educational contexts beyond Vietnam.

Longitudinal research: Investigating the long-term sustainability of the regenerative loop.

Systems modelling: Using agent-based and systems dynamics simulations to understand institutional scaling.

Policy experimentation: Collaborating with ministries of education to pilot systemic Mindfulness frameworks.

6.8. Key Value Propositions - Global Contributions

Living ≠ Metaphor: "Living" denotes a dynamic, ethical, spiritual, and intellectual ecosystem.

Paradigm Shift: Repositions happiness as a living, structural process, not merely an outcome.

Scalability: Adaptable across contexts, aligned with ESD, SDGs, Positive Education, and global resilience agendas.

This model not only contributes theoretical insight but offers a practical roadmap for universities globally to integrate well-being, sustainability, and organisational resilience into a coherent and compassionate learning ecosystem.

6.9. Final Statement

The Living Mindfulness Model is not merely a conceptual innovation, it is an ethical imperative for 21st-century higher education. In response to escalating crises of mental health, ecological degradation, and social disconnection, Mindfulness, understood as a regenerative organisational paradigm, offers a transformative path towards flourishing institutions, resilient communities, and a sustainable planet.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire

Title: A Living Mindfulness Model for Happy and Sustainable Universities

Purpose: Measuring five constructs: Mindfulness Practice, Emotional Well-being, Community Engagement, Sustainability Awareness, Institutional Loyalty

Scale: 5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Section 1: Demographics Gender | Year of Birth | Academic Year | Field of Study | Religious Affiliation

Section 2: Mindfulness & Well-being

Table 1: Mindfulness Practice Measurement Items.

Code	Item
M1	I regularly practice mindfulness (e.g., breathing, meditation, deep listening, loving speech).
M2	I am aware of my thoughts and emotions in study and daily life.
M3	Mindfulness practice helps me reduce stress and anxiety.
M4	Mindfulness practice helps me maintain focus and learning productivity.
M5	I feel inner peace and balance in my learning and life.

Section 3: Community Engagement

Table 2: Community Engagement Items.

Code	Item
C1	I feel deeply connected with peers, faculty, and the university community.
C2	I actively participate in supportive activities within the university.
C3	Mindfulness helps me cultivate compassion and empathy for others.
C4	I perceive my university community as nurturing, kind, and supportive.

Section 4: Sustainability Awareness

Table 3: Sustainability Awareness Items.

Code	Item
S1	I am aware of my role in building a sustainable university environment.
S2	I care about sustainability issues (environmental, social, spiritual) within the university.
S3	Mindfulness enhances my responsibility towards the community and the planet.
S4	I believe that sustainable happiness is linked to community and ecosystem development.

Section 5: Institutional Loyalty

Table 4: Institutional Loyalty Items.

Code	Item
L1	I feel happy and satisfied with the learning environment at my university.
L2	I wish to stay connected with the university after graduation.
L3	I would recommend this university to others as a happy, sustainable place to learn.

Section 6: Open-ended → Please share your experiences, feelings, or suggestions about the role of Mindfulness in building a happy and sustainable learning environment.

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Purpose: Deep exploration of Mindfulness impacts at personal, community, and institutional levels.

Key Themes:
1. Warm-up and demographic questions
2. Mindfulness and emotional well-being
3. Community building and resilience
4. Organisational and ecological integration

5. Perceptions of sustainability
6. Evaluation of the Living Mindfulness Model
7. Closing reflections

APPENDIX C. QUALITATIVE CODING FRAMEWORK

Sample: n = 12 interviews (4 Buddhist monastics, 5 student practitioners, 3 university staff)
Software: NVivo 14
Method: Thematic analysis grounded in Buddhist hermeneutics

Table 5: Thematic Coding Summary.

Theme	Frequency (%)	Representative Quote
Inner Transformation	85%	"The practice of mindful breathing and meditation helps me feel more peaceful and focused." (Student #4)
Community Resilience	72%	"The campus community has become noticeably more caring and supportive." (Admin #1)
Organisational & Ecological Embeddedness	58%	"It would be impactful if mindfulness were integrated into governance policies." (Faculty #5)
Sustainability Awareness	67%	"Practicing mindfulness helps me realise the connection between my mental well-being and my responsibility to the environment." (Student #3)
Institutionalisation Challenges	50%	"The challenge is how to embed it into the organisational culture." (Faculty #4)

APPENDIX D. CFA AND SEM RESULTS

Model Fit Indices:
CFI = 0.948
TLI = 0.932
RMSEA = 0.049
SRMR = 0.041
SEM Path Coefficients:

Pathway	Standardised Estimate	p-value	Result
Mindfulness → Emotional Well-being	0.71	<0.001	✔
Mindfulness → Community Engagement	0.65	<0.001	✔
Community + Mindfulness → Sustainability Awareness	0.58	<0.001	✔
Sustainability Awareness → Institutional Loyalty	0.62	<0.001	✔

APPENDIX E. SDGS MAPPING TABLE

Table 6: Model Components and SDG Alignment.

Model Component	Related SDG	Description
Mindfulness Practice	SDG 3	Promotes mental health and well-being
Emotional Well-being	SDG 4	Enhances inclusive, quality education and emotional resilience
Community Engagement	SDG 11	Strengthens inclusive and safe learning communities
Sustainability Awareness	SDG 13	Fosters climate action and environmental consciousness
Institutional Loyalty	SDG 17	Builds partnerships and long-term institutional commitment