by Jochen Reb & Eva Katharina Peters

The Science and Practice of Mindfulness at Work: Reclaiming Wellbeing in Business Education

Reimagining Wellbeing in Business Schools

Much of today's world is characterised by a sense of deep uncertainty, digital overload, and relentless performance pressure. Mental health challenges are on the rise worldwide, especially among young people. In this context, teaching and learning essential wellbeing skills can be seen as both a personal necessity for students and a strategic imperative for business schools. Yet, traditional approaches often fall short. Many universities still operate from a deficit or illness-oriented model, relying heavily on counselling centres and reactive health services to address stress and mental health challenges after they arise. Wellbeing is also frequently relegated to the co-curricular domain—offered through yoga classes, peer support groups, or resilience workshops as optional extras—rather than embedded into the academic core. In other cases, institutions implicitly equate wellbeing with career achievement, assuming it will follow naturally if students secure prestigious jobs. This, however, risks reinforcing the notion that financial or professional success is the primary pathway to a fulfilling life.

While well-intentioned, these approaches often remain fragmented, peripheral, and out of reach to many students. More intensive interventions, such as executive leadership retreats or immersive self-development courses, are typically reserved for graduate students or those identified as 'high-potential' leaders, and they lack scalability within undergraduate business education.

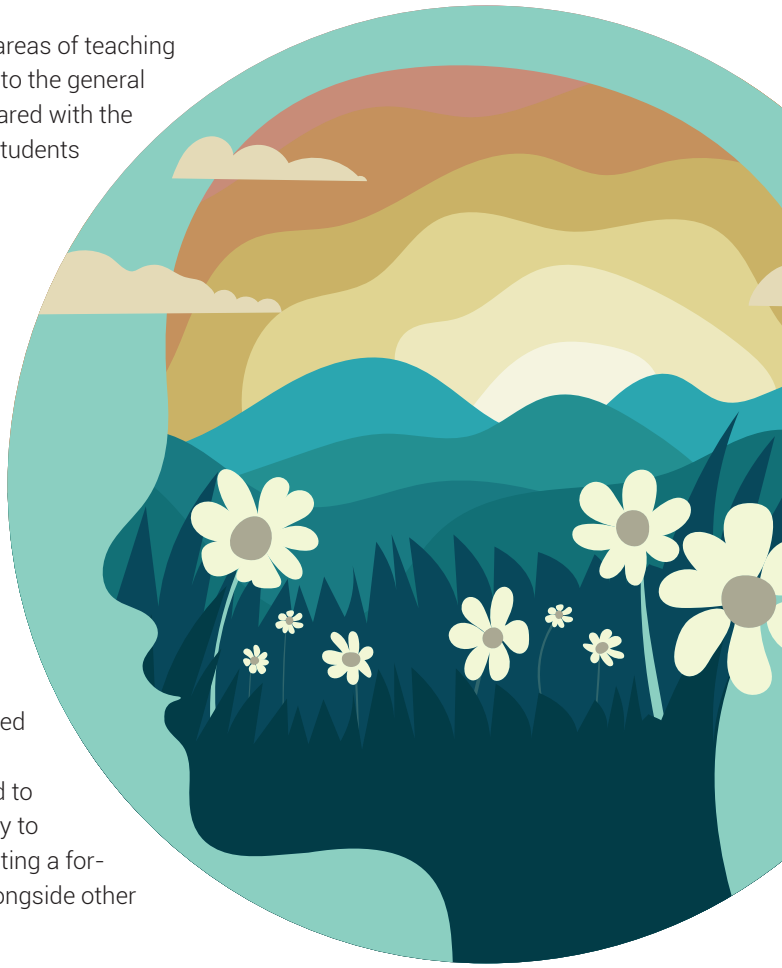
As faculty members in such environments, we witness firsthand students' struggles with anxiety, attention deficits, and burnout—realities that mirror the broader crises in higher education and the corporate world alike. In this article, we offer a reflection on one institutional intervention: the development of an undergraduate course at Singapore Management University (SMU), titled The Science and Practice of Mindfulness at Work. Drawing from mindfulness and positive psychology, this course aims not only to support student wellbeing but also to cultivate future leaders with the emotional and ethical capacity to navigate complexity with intention and care.

We designed and delivered this course to address not only individual student challenges but also the broader institutional and cultural dynamics of business schools. It was clear to us that there is a need to create a pedagogical model that is both scalable and deeply human, capable of reshaping classroom culture and planting the seeds for more mindful and sustainable forms of leadership and management. This article outlines the motivation, history, structure, evidence base, and future potential of this course, situated in the broader landscape of wellbeing in higher education.

History of the Course

Before going into course content, we recount the—admittedly brief—history of the course. In 2013, the Mindfulness Initiative was established at SMU's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, with the support of the dean at the time, Howard Thomas, and directed by one of the authors (JR). The initiative's mission was, and still is, to engage in research, teaching, and outreach in the area of mindfulness, particularly as relevant to business

and organisations. For the initial years, the main areas of teaching consisted of mindfulness-based courses offered to the general public. While the courses were advertised and shared with the SMU community, no courses dedicated to SMU students were offered.



Over the years, a few faculty members have integrated some mindfulness practices into their courses. For example, one of us (JR) would offer short mindfulness practices at the beginning of class sessions in courses on decision-making and negotiations, purely on an optional basis. Another addition was co-curricular mindfulness-based offerings such as regular 'Mindful Monday' sessions of around 30-45 minutes, occasional workshops (e.g., on how mindfulness practice can help students during the stressful exam period), and courses for students struggling with stress and mental health (offered by an SMU counsellor). As we engaged in these various activities, we encountered a recurring problem: SMU students were busy, and co-curricular activities tended to be relegated to a lower priority. This suggested a path forward: try to integrate mindfulness into the curriculum by creating a for-credit course that would give it equal standing alongside other courses in the school.

The challenge: Not everyone takes mindfulness seriously as an academic subject. There is some conservatism in academia (one can debate whether for good or bad). At SMU, a series of hurdles had to be passed. An important step was obtaining approval from the committee vetting new courses. This involved multiple rounds of revisions based on helpful feedback. A key requirement was that the course be science- and evidence-based. This demand was met by including a considerable number of academic papers and basing the mindfulness practices on an established protocol. Another demand was that the course be graded rather than pass/fail. The concern—perhaps justified—was that students might sign up for the course only or partly because they perceive it as an 'easy mod', rather than because of their motivation to learn about mindfulness, conceptually and practically. The latter would be extremely problematic as the course requires regular active engagement with the mindfulness practices (including reflection and related readings).

Helpfully, a group of faculty members involved with the Mindfulness Initiative had received a Ministry of Education grant to evaluate the outcomes of a mindfulness-based higher education course. This grant not only gave further credibility to establish this new, for-credit course but also provided funding to examine its effectiveness.

Given the initial success of the course, as evidenced by the research findings, high student demand, and favourable course evaluations, we successfully applied for the course to become part of the SMU university

core curriculum. At SMU, students have to select courses from several core curriculum 'baskets'. While being part of a basket does not require students to take this specific course, it does open up the course to students from all schools at SMU, beyond the business school. During the last academic year, the course was offered for the first time as part of the curriculum. This has brought some new challenges—in particular, not all students are as motivated about mindfulness as they were during the initial, more select intakes—but it is overall a highly rewarding development.

A Dual Challenge in Business Education: Wellbeing and Attention

The motivation for this course is grounded in two intersecting challenges (see Figure 1). The first is the wellbeing challenge, with rising rates of mental health concerns documented among students worldwide. For example, one in three first-year college students globally reported symptoms consistent with a diagnosable mental health condition (Auerbach et al., 2018). Business school students face unique challenges, including intense workloads, high expectations for success, and often competitive academic cultures. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated stress, anxiety, and disconnection in these environments.

At the same time, we are experiencing an attentional crisis. Our world is saturated by information, algorithmic feeds, and multitasking norms. This endangers the capacity to focus deeply and intentionally. As Herbert Simon famously observed, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." Research on digital distraction and media multitasking illustrates how cognitive fragmentation, or the 'scatter brain' as we like to call it, undermines learning and wellbeing. Chronic media multitaskers tend to perform worse on attention-switching tasks and have difficulty filtering irrelevant information (Ophir, Nass and Wagner, 2009). It is clear that the current conditions of information overload undermine not only cognitive performance but also emotional regulation, learning, and interpersonal presence—core competencies for effective leadership.

For business schools, the attention and wellbeing challenges present a paradox. While institutions are increasingly focused on preparing students for the demands of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, they often overlook the inner capacities—attention, self-awareness, emotional regulation—that are essential for navigating it well. Without developing these inner skills, business students may graduate technically competent but emotionally depleted, cognitively scattered, and disconnected from purpose.

A Strategic Response: The Science and Practice of Mindfulness at Work

We developed this course to respond to the above wellbeing and attention challenges. It is a structured, evidence-based intervention that aims to equip business students with the inner capacities they need to navigate the challenging conditions of modern university and working life (see Figure 1 for a summary). The course integrates the contemplative science of mindfulness with the empirically grounded field of positive psychology. Importantly, we don't introduce mindfulness primarily as a relaxation technique, but as a systematic method for cultivating clarity, presence, and intentional decision-making and action. The positive psychology elements contribute a strengths-based, future-oriented lens focused on flourishing, meaning, and resilience.

The curriculum is based on the first version of the Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training (MBSAT), developed by Juan Humberto Young (2016). This training is designed for improving wellbeing, strategic awareness, and decision-making skills in healthy working adults. For the SMU course, we adapted the framework to meet the needs of undergraduate students navigating the complexity of academic, career, and

relational demands. MBSAT emphasises self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-transcendence, and is structured to guide participants through the stages of recognising, understanding, and acting on their internal experience with strategic awareness.

To cultivate these skills, students engage in a broad repertoire of mindfulness practices over the 13-week semester. These include foundational practices such as mindful breathing, body scanning, and focused awareness meditation, which help train attentional stability and somatic awareness. They also explore applied mindfulness techniques, such as the STOP technique (Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed), mindful walking, and mindful eating to train body awareness, emotional regulation, and a less reactive relationship with impulsive behaviours. Students learn to identify their dominant stress triggers and practice pausing and responding to them with curiosity and compassion.

Each week, students learn a new form of mindfulness practice—including traditional seated meditation, mindful walking, mindful movement (e.g., stretching with awareness and dancing), and mindful eating. This variety lets them personalise their practice and experiment with incorporating mindfulness into different areas of life. Importantly, we also include interpersonal mindfulness practices like mindful listening, loving-kindness practice, and mindful appreciation exercises for different types of relationships (to family, friends, colleagues, or strangers). These practices and exercises help develop social-emotional awareness, empathy, and the ability to build meaningful, respectful relationships.

The positive psychology component complements and expands these mindfulness-based practices. Students are guided through a sequence of reflective exercises that help them clarify their personal values and envision a positive future self. They complete a VIA Strengths Survey (Seligman et al., 2005) and engage in strength-based feedback-seeking from peers, friends, colleagues, and bosses to create their Mindful Positive Self Portrait (MPS; Young, 2016) to enhance self-efficacy and motivation.

Together, the mindfulness and positive psychology components of the course offer a dual approach: mindfulness helps students notice and disrupt unhelpful mental, emotional, and behavioural patterns, while positive psychology helps them orient toward values, goals, and strengths. Integrating these two domains fosters both inner balance and proactive flourishing, forming a dynamic foundation for leadership and wellbeing in both personal and professional life.

Course Structure: From Inner Awareness to Systemic Engagement

The course unfolds across twelve weeks and is organised into five pedagogical stages that progressively build students' self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and social mindfulness, while expanding their understanding of leadership and systemic interconnection.

The first stage, Cultivating Present-Moment Awareness, focuses on developing students' capacity to direct and sustain attention in the present moment. Students begin with practices such as mindful breathing and body scanning. These foundational exercises help them connect with bodily sensations and anchor attention, which is often scattered in our modern multitasking environments.

The second stage, Emotional and Cognitive Awareness, introduces techniques for observing thoughts and emotions without judgment. Students learn to identify and label emotions, observe patterns in their internal dialogue, and practice meta-cognitive awareness through thought-watching exercises. These practices foster emotional regulation and reduce automatic reactivity to stressors.

In the third stage, Habitual Patterns and Self-Regulation, the course focus shifts to cultivating intentional behaviour. Students explore how habits form, how beliefs develop and shape behaviours, and how mindfulness can disrupt unhelpful routines. Meditation practices to gain awareness of action impulses and beliefs, and reflection on existing triggers, help students build greater agency in their actions and develop healthier coping strategies.

The fourth stage, Relational and Organisational Mindfulness, extends mindfulness into social and organisational contexts. Students engage in mindful communication exercises, including deep listening. They reflect on how mindfulness and presence affect interpersonal relationships in general, as well as teamwork and leadership. Topics include mindful leadership and mindfulness, and cooperation.

The final stage, Systemic Flourishing and Societal Wellbeing, broadens the perspective to include ecological, societal, and global systems. Students explore the interdependence between personal wellbeing and collective sustainability. They reflect on their roles as emerging leaders in a complex world and discuss how mindfulness and values-based action can address societal challenges such as inequality and climate change.

Course Pedagogy

The course is designed not only to convey knowledge, but to transform classroom culture. It blends lecture content with experiential learning, peer dialogue, and reflective assignments. Each week includes:

- One - two new mindfulness practices (e.g., breath awareness, mindful eating, mindful walking)
- Daily at-home practice and journaling (journals are submitted once per week)
- Assigned academic readings on the science of mindfulness at work
- Pre-session quizzes to reinforce engagement with the academic readings
- Weekly group-led presentations on mindfulness research reading assignments
- Classroom discussions in peer groups and plenum
- A team-based 'Mindfulness for Others' project applying course principles to peer or community flourishing

Evidence of Impact: Research Findings

To evaluate the course's effectiveness, we conducted a research project over two terms with funding from Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE). Using a quasi-experimental design, we compared students in the mindfulness course to an active control group enrolled in a decision-making class taught by the same instructor (JR). Students in both groups completed a pre-survey one week before the course start (i.e., Time 1), a post-course survey within one week of the last class (i.e., Time 2), and a follow-up survey approximately two months after the end of the class (i.e., Time 3). Quantitative measures included validated scales assessing a range of wellbeing skills (e.g., body awareness, acceptance, resilience, self-compassion, and compassion for others) and wellbeing states (e.g., affect, gratitude, stress, worry, psychological need satisfaction, and flourishing).

The data told a clear and encouraging story. By the end of the semester (Time 2), students who had taken the mindfulness course showed meaningful gains across all measured wellbeing skills—gains that were not only statistically significant, but also consistent across different aspects of wellbeing. Compared to their peers in

the control group, these students reported greater positive emotions, lower stress and worry, higher gratitude, stronger feelings of competence and connection to others, and an overall sense of flourishing. Importantly, these differences remained even after we took into account where participants had started at the beginning of the term.

Three months later (Time 3), most of these improvements held steady. The mindfulness group continued to score higher than the control group on nearly every wellbeing indicator. The only exceptions were negative affect—which by then no longer differed significantly between groups—and gratitude, whose initial boost had evened out over time once we controlled for baseline levels. Still, the sustained improvements in most measures suggest that the course had a lasting positive impact, equipping students with skills and mindsets that extended beyond the classroom. Together, these findings indicate that the MBHE course had a strong and sustained positive impact on participants' wellbeing and offer promising initial evidence for the value and efficacy of the course.

We also collected qualitative data from student journals and post-course reflection essays. Although not yet formally analysed, recurring themes include increased self-awareness, greater emotional regulation, improved relationships, and a shift in values toward meaningful work and service-oriented leadership. Students often described the course as "transformative," "grounding," and "the most impactful class" of their university career. Here is an example (albeit admittedly a very positive one):

"I was sharing with a friend of mine on how this module is probably one of the best modules I have taken because of how much clarity and perception it gave me on life / how we can change our views by practicing mindfulness. I really wish that I took this module in year 1 because that would have affected how I viewed uni and the things I would have done, but I guess better late than never. This module has given me insights that I can practically use in my life. This module should be compulsory."

Using an active control group allowed us to draw stronger conclusions about the course's effects and to address one of the most frequent critiques of mindfulness research—that many studies compare against passive controls or waitlist groups, which can exaggerate results due to expectancy or placebo effects (Davidson and Kaszniak, 2015). In addition, by assessing not only immediate outcomes such as changes in wellbeing states, but also longer-term developmental capacities—what we call wellbeing skills—this study points to the potential for the course to create lasting benefits.

Institutional Implications: A Scalable Wellbeing Strategy

Crucially, this course offers a scalable institutional intervention to enhance student wellbeing in business schools. Unlike high-cost retreats, short-term workshops, or holistic approaches to management education that require extensive resources, the course is embedded into the regular classroom structure and has recently been incorporated into the SMU core curriculum. Its cross-faculty accessibility allows it to reach a wider and more diverse student population, extending its potential impact. This model aligns with calls from research and practice for university-wide wellbeing strategies (e.g., Bannigan et al., 2025). For business schools in particular, it marks a meaningful shift: from viewing wellbeing solely as an individual responsibility to recognising it as a collective and strategic priority.

Importantly, it is worth emphasising that instructor training is crucial to ensuring high-quality course delivery. Mindfulness cannot be effectively taught without a sustained personal practice. Facilitators must be capable of holding space for students' emotional processes and model the presence they aim to help students

cultivate. Therefore, to effectively expand the course's reach, future efforts should include faculty development programmes and peer mentoring. Where resources allow, co-teaching models offer a promising opportunity to enhance the student learning experience and balance instructor workloads.

Our hope is to interest other institutions in including this course model in their business school curricula. We welcome opportunities to collaborate and share our curriculum to support adaptation across diverse contexts. The course materials, practice guides, and research protocols are available for review and use. Ultimately, our goal is to contribute to a broader shift in management education—one that centres human flourishing, ethical awareness, and systemic care (see Figure 1 for a summary).

Conclusion: Reclaiming Human Flourishing in Business Education

Teaching this course has confirmed for us that business education can do more than prepare students for the market—it can also prepare them for life. As business schools grapple with competing pressures—from 'publish or perish' mandates to employability targets—we must not lose sight of our deeper mission: to educate thoughtful, grounded, and self-aware human beings.

Mindfulness and positive psychology offer powerful tools for cultivating the inner resources necessary for leadership in an age of uncertainty. By embedding these approaches into the curriculum, and by treating wellbeing as a foundational concern rather than an afterthought, business schools can become incubators of flourishing, benefitting not only students, but also the societies they will go on to shape. Addressing wellbeing in business schools is not a luxury; it is a necessity. With intentional curricular design, supported by committed leadership and a culture of care, we hope to provide an example of how we can reclaim education as a space not only for learning but for flourishing.

References

Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., Demyttenaere, K., Ebert, D. D., Green, J. G., Hasking, P., Murray, E., Nock, M. K., Pinder-Amaker, S., Sampson, N. A., Stein, D. J., Vilagut, G., Zaslavsky, A. M., and Kessler, R. C. (2018) WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 127*(7) pp. 623–638. https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362

Bannigan, G., McGrath, D., and Matthews, J. (2025) Whole-university approaches to embedding wellbeing in the curriculum: A scoping review. *Frontiers in Education, 10*, 1534244. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1534244

Davidson, R. J., and Kaszniak, A. W. (2015) Conceptual and methodological issues in research on mindfulness and meditation. *The American Psychologist, 70*(7) pp. 581–592. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039512

Ophir, E., Nass, C., and Wagner, A. D. (2009) Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106*(37) pp. 15583–15587. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0903620106

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., and Peterson, C. (2005) Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60*(5) pp. 410–421. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410

Young, J. H. (2016) *Mindfulness-based strategic awareness training: A complete program for leaders and individuals.* John Wiley & Sons.

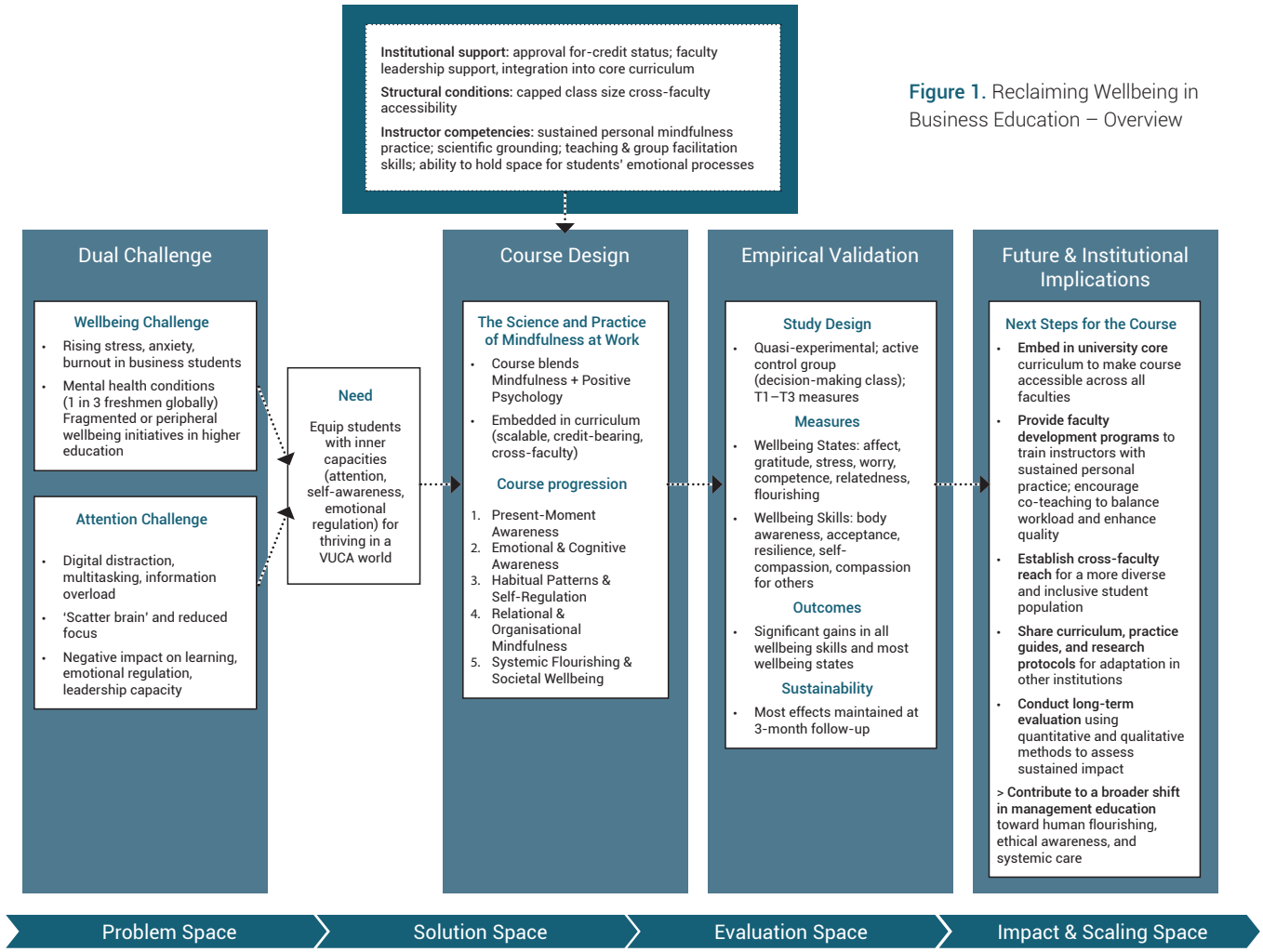


Figure 1. Reclaiming Wellbeing in Business Education – Overview

About the authors

Jochen Reb is Lee Kong Chian Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resources, and Director of the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. His research and teaching focuses on how smart heuristics enable us to make effective decisions in a VUCA world, and how mindfulness applies in organisational contexts such as leadership, sustainable wellbeing, and performance.

Eva Katharina Peters, PhD, is an organisational psychologist and mindfulness educator dedicated to integrating evidence-based mindfulness training into higher education and professional development. She designs, teaches, and researches mindfulness programmes that foster attention, sustainable performance, and human flourishing.