

# Leadership in Transforming Higher Education

The Happiness Campus Journey at the University of Coimbra

Prof. Cristina Albuquerque  
Coimbra University

Slides Prepared by Dr. Verónica Quítalo



# Drop out and Mental Health Crisis in Universities

## The Challenge

Universities face mounting mental health challenges affecting student retention and academic success. Drop-out rates continue to rise as students struggle with stress, anxiety, and disconnection.

Traditional approaches often fall short in addressing the root causes of student distress and disengagement.

## Our Response

University of Coimbra have launched innovative programs combining pedagogical innovation with evidence-based wellness techniques:

- Happy@UC  
(*Pedagogical Innovation4UC-2021*)
- On Board  
(*Happy Campus@UC 2023*)





## SKY Breath Break Study 2021

### Study Design

Two groups:

Experimental (SKY Breath Break; n=24) and Control (break-as-usual; n=24).

*Random assignment; groups similar at baseline.* Participants came from:

**Chemistry (MA)**  
**Biomedical Modeling (BA),**  
**Hydrogeology (BA),**  
**Mathematics Education (MA), and**  
**Special Needs in Physical Education (MA)**

### The Intervention

5–10 min guided breathing and mindfulness sessions during class when attention dipped, using **13 pre-recorded videos** provided to faculty. These were implemented in:

- **Chemistry** (on Master's Program)
- **Computational Methods in Biomedicine / Computational Modeling** (Undergraduate Program in Biomedicine)
- **Hydrogeology** (Undergraduate Program in Biology)
- **Mathematics Education** (on Master's Program)
- **Special Educational Needs in Physical Education** (on Master's Program for Secondary School Physical Education Teachers)

### Measurement (Students)

Pre/post assessments of 5 dimensions **psychological distress, affect, mindfulness, resilience, and procrastination**

### Interviews (Faculty)

Semi-structured interviews on 13 themes (among them motivation, **attention/emotion regulation, new strategies for managing attention/emotions, teaching-learning process**, teacher–student relationship, **teacher self awareness, attention and learning**, teacher classroom behavior), conducted via Zoom or in writing.



## RESULTS (Quantitative and Qualitative)

**p=.001**

**Psychological Symptoms**  
Significant reduction in distress  
(BSI)

### Emotional Regulation (6/6 faculty)

**All faculty recognized clear emotional benefits:** lower anxiety and stress, better stress management, and a calmer, more aware classroom environment. Students were described as “more interested, animated, and aware” during lessons.

**p=.022**

**Positive Affect**  
Meaningful increase in positive emotions (PANAS)

### New Strategies for managing Attention/Emotions (5/6 faculty)

Five faculty acknowledged the impact of **new strategies to manage discomfort, pressure, and time during teaching**, noting that **these strategies extended beyond the classroom into daily life.**

**p=.025**

**Mindfulness**  
Enhanced present-moment awareness  
(CAMS-R)

### Teacher Self-Awareness (5/6 faculty)

Five faculty reported behavioral changes such as **greater attention to students’ expressions** and signs of inattention, **increased acceptance and empathy**, **heightened awareness of their own and students’ difficulties**, and **lower personal anxiety.**

**p=.007**

**Procrastination**  
Significant decrease in task avoidance  
(TPS)

### Attention & Learning (5/6 faculty)

Five faculty reported that the project helped them and their students **recenter attention, better manage focus during long sessions**, and complete a demanding semester successfully. They noted **more active student participation and greater engagement in class practices.**

Control Group showed no significant changes in any variable.



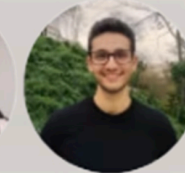
## Faculty Insights: Transformation in Action

Six faculty joined this project to support student wellbeing, addressing anxiety, burnout, fatigue, and distraction. In the interviews, they reported transformative impacts on attention, emotional regulation, and classroom climate, as well as increased proximity and rapport with students. Teachers described feeling more like “guiders,” supporting student growth.

## Takeaway

Even brief SKY Breath Breaks can boost students’ focus, emotional regulation, focus, engagement, and relationships, while also supporting faculty wellbeing. Scaling these practices across campuses could strengthen community, enhance learning, and help reduce student dropout over the long term.

Repeating the study and these practices on a larger scale could amplify their impact across campuses and help to collect more robust evidence.



## Scaling Impact: ON BOARD 2023 - ACTIVITIES 4 & 5 - HAPPY CAMPUS@UC

Workshops on Personal and Social Connection for the Promotion of Academic and Emotional Well-Being

### Program Structure

(4 Levels- 7 months)

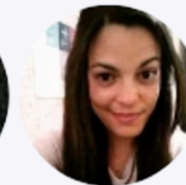
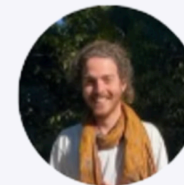
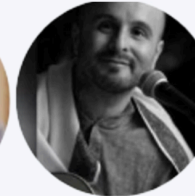
1. SKY Wellness Seminars / Breath Breaks (+40)
2. SKY Happiness & Wellness Retreat (offered twice)
3. SKY Silent Retreat (offered twice)
4. SKY Leadership Training (offered once)

### Goal

Reduce stress and anxiety, enhance well-being, emotional regulation, social connection, resilience, and leadership, and certify new Well-Being Mentors from the UC community

Invited Advanced Teachers  
Support Team

(initial phase of the project)



# The ON BOARD Program: 7 months

(followed of mentoring and study period)



## SKY Happiness Retreat

20 hours over 4 days including SKY Breath Meditation, emotional regulation training, yoga, and group bonding

**138 participants learned the Evidence Based SKY Breathing Technique**



## SKY Silent Retreat

4 day non residential retreat for deep rest, advanced meditation, and enhanced self-awareness

**50 participants graduated from Advanced Program** with meditation and SKY Breath techniques



## SKY Leadership Training

Two-weekend program training students and faculty to facilitate SKY activities, building program sustainability

**24 New Well Being Mentors Certified by SKY**  
**Campus Happiness** can facilitate meditation and some SKY breath techniques



## Interviews

Interviews were conducted with **11 participants** using semi-structured questions across six main themes—emotion regulation and stress reduction, self-compassion and self-acceptance, **cognitive clarity and focus**, relationships (**empathy and connection**), purpose (**belonging and inner guidance**), and **behavioral change/intentional action**.

These Zoom interviews took place **9 months after** the program and again **2 years after** the program (with the 2-year follow-up still ongoing).

# Sustained Transformation - results after 9 months

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom with 11 participants, 9 months and 2 years following their participation in the program.



## Emotional Regulation / Stress Reduction

"Whenever I felt stressed, I breathed... everything became calmer." Reduced stress and anxiety, increased calmness and resilience, and a stronger ability to pause and regulate reactions.



## Focus / Mental Clarity / Cognitive Functioning

"The concentration technique really worked for me... I could study much better," and "I can do more tasks in less time and with better focus." I do more tasks in less time and with more ease." Better focus, higher efficiency, reduced cognitive overload.



## Relationships / Empathy / Connection

"I feel more spontaneous and open with colleagues, creating greater empathy and connection." More authentic interactions, less judgment, more open communication, stronger community sense.



## Academic / Professional Performance

"I endure classes better, stay focused and calm," Improved study habits, teaching presence, attention, motivation, and overall academic and professional performance.



## Complementar Education

Programs offered by SKY Campus Happiness provide students and staff with practical tools for emotional regulation, focus, social connection, and well-being, complementing formal academic and professional training.

## Transformation in Campus

Although these results come from a small group of participants, the empirical experience provides encouraging evidence that programs following the SKY Campus Happiness format may support emotional regulation, focus, relationships, and professional performance. Further studies with larger participant groups undergoing a similar package of SKY Campus Happiness programs will help confirm and expand on these promising results.

# Sustained Transformation - results after 9 months

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom with 11 participants, 9 months and 2 years following their participation in the program.



## Emotional Regulation / Stress Reduction

"Whenever I felt stressed, I breathed... everything became calmer." Reduced stress and anxiety, increased calmness and resilience, and a stronger ability to pause and regulate reactions.



## Focus / Mental Clarity / Cognitive Functioning

"The concentration technique really worked for me... I could study much better," and "I can do more tasks in less time and with better focus." I do more tasks in less time and with more ease." Better focus, higher efficiency, reduced cognitive overload.



## Relationships / Empathy / Connection

"I feel more spontaneous and open with colleagues, creating greater empathy and connection." More authentic interactions, less judgment, more open communication, stronger community sense.



## Academic / Professional Performance

"I endure classes better, stay focused and calm," Improved study habits, teaching presence, attention, motivation, and overall academic and professional performance.