Well-being in crisis: Mindful practices for Canadian higher education instructors

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Article Info

Abstract

Canadian higher education instructors, particularly non-full-time instructors, are grappling with increasing challenges from precarious employment, chronic underfunding, and inequitable policy shifts. This paper draws on Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons* and Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness philosophy to critique the neoliberal transformation of Canadian higher education, which prioritizes profit over intellectual and social values. It explores the exploitative reliance on international students' financial contributions and the transformative yet disruptive impact of AI on teaching roles, revealing the detrimental effects of these systems on educators' well-being. By emphasizing the critical link between educators' mental well-being and systemic change, the paper advocates for mindfulness as a powerful tool to process strong emotions, promote healing, and inspire the creation of alternative spaces for resistance and meaningful reform.

Introduction

Teaching has long been recognized as one of the most stressful careers, with stress levels similar to those of paramedics and police officers (Johnson et al., 2005). In the Canadian context, almost 80 percent of teachers report increased stress levels in recent years (Froese-Germain, 2014), and approximately 60 percent of educators report experiencing anxiety, depression, and burnout (Mental Health Research Canada, 2023). The unpredictability and intensity of educators' work environments adversely affect both their mental and physical well-being and, in turn, impair their capacity to perform their professional roles. Despite the prevalence of stress-related challenges, educators' overall well-being is frequently overlooked (Hartcher et al., 2023). Within a neoliberal framework, teachers are frequently positioned as skilled technicians expected to optimize efficiency and master standardized methods for delivering prescribed bodies of knowledge (Giroux, 2011; Rigas & Kuchapski, 2018). This approach to teaching often requires educators to place institutional demands and student academic outcomes above their own physical, emotional, and psychological well-being (Thich Nhat Hanh & Weare, 2017).

However, teachers are not teaching machines; they are human beings, and importantly, a "key resource for ensuring the quality of a nation's education" (Rigas & Kuchapski, 2018, p. 392). Their emotional and mental well-being is intrinsically linked to organizational health and the future of the next generation, being identified as "a critical determinant in the achievement of positive social and academic learning outcomes" (McCallum, 2021, p. 715). When educator well-being is ignored—or worse, reduced to a discretionary benefit considered only when budgets permit (Acton & Glasgow, 2015), the consequences extend beyond individual burnout to threaten the sustainability and quality of education itself (Roeser et al., 2012). These conditions underscore the urgency of critically examining how teacher well-being can be meaningfully supported, particularly through interventions that foster positive psychological functioning and long-term resilience (Oades, 2017).

This urgency is particularly pronounced in the contemporary Canadian higher education landscape. Higher education instructors (HEIs), especially non-full-time instructors (NFTIs), are navigating an exceptionally turbulent period shaped by rapid technological automation and abrupt policy shifts. These forces have significantly intensified job insecurity, heightened occupational stress, and contributed to widespread job displacement across the sector. To date, more than 600 college programs have been eliminated, resulting in the loss of over 10,000 academic positions (Alhmidi, 2025). The repercussions of these disruptions extend beyond individual livelihoods, placing the broader academic ecosystem at risk by undermining educational quality, research continuity, and the preservation of institutional knowledge (ICEF Monitor, 2024; Usher, 2024a).

In response to this rapidly evolving and complex reality, HEIs and NFTIs must cultivate resilience and adaptive strategies to safeguard their well-being. This paper, thus, explores the multifaceted challenges confronting Canadian HEIs and NFTIs today and proposes mindful self-practices as vital tools to navigate these turbulent times while maintaining their well-being.

To understand the structural factors causing the suffering and precarious circumstances of Canadian HEIs and NFTIs, this paper draws on *The Undercommons* theory by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013). Harney and Moten (2013) critique the neo-liberalization of universities, where market logics dominate decision-making and prioritizes profit over genuine intellectual or social value. They argue that the university's focus on measurable productivity—such as rankings, publications, and funding—transforms educators into managers of knowledge rather than participants in transformative praxis. This business-oriented model aligns with critiques by other scholars, including Barnett's (2013) concept of the "entrepreneurial university," Giroux's (2009; 2011) "corporate university," and Andrew's (2023, 2024) or Fleming's (2021) analysis of the "modern neoliberal university". Neoliberalism has shifted institutional values from care and collaboration to a focus on competitive advantage, fostering anger, despair, and feelings of powerlessness among educators (Blackmore, 2013, p. 147).

Confronting this reality, Harney and Moten (2013) encourage the "fugitive" scholar to operate within the cracks of the system, navigating between the university and the undercommons—a space where rebellion and critique coexist, but not through direct confrontation or the illusion of resolution: "it is not a place where we take arms against a sea of troubles/and by opposing end them" (p. 9). They argue that universities are fundamentally designed to uphold existing power dynamics, making transformative reform from within improbable, so "the on-

-ly possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one" (p. 26). This perspective calls for meaningful engagement that challenges the institution's oppressive structures by rejecting its norms, values, and expectations. It advocates for leveraging the cracks in the system to cultivate spaces of resistance, critique, and alternative ways of being.

Building on this critique, this paper suggests that such alternative space can emerge from within and through intentional mindful self-practice. Inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy, which asserts that systemic change begins with individual consciousness— "to be peace first and to do peace later" (Plum Village App, 2023). This can potentially be the personal survival strategy of educators, which will benefit the whole educational environment, students and institutions alike (White & Kern, 2018). Mindfulness fosters personal resilience and interconnectedness, enabling educators to transform and sustain their resistance while creating ripple effects that gradually reshape institutions. Through integrating mindful self-practice into the fissures of the academic system, HEIs and NFTIs can embody a form of "fugitive" scholarship that harmonizes well-being with the capacity to disrupt institutional logics from within.

Together, *the undercommons* and mindfulness create a praxis of sustainable resistance: navigating oppressive structures while maintaining the well-being necessary for transformative possibility. While many well-being frameworks emphasize individual coping strategies divorced from structural critique, mindfulness philosophy offers a particularly relevant approach for educators who work in neoliberal academic environments. Asacknowledged, Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of teachers as first and foremost "healers" (p.15), empowers her transgressive educational work. When placed alongside Harney and Moten's (2013) concept of *The Undercommons*, mindfulness transforms from an individual wellness practice into a collective and political stance. *The Undercommons* provides the critical lens through which self-sustenance can be understood as both refusal and survival, enabling the cultivation of alternative academic lifeworlds within neoliberal regimes—an especially salient framework for interrogating the precarious realities of Canadian HEIs.

The current context of Canadian higher education and its impacts on HEIs and NFTIs

From this theoretical grounding, the analysis now turns to the complex and rapidly shifting terrain of Canadian higher education, shaped by multiple converging structural forces. Artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally reconfiguring traditional academic roles, while volatile funding regimes and abrupt shifts in immigration policy intensify institutional instability. These dynamics exert profound pressure on HEIs and NFTIs, the very lifeblood of the education system.

AI as a stressor for HEIs and NFTIs

Academic researchers have extensively documented the profound threats AI poses to education, particularly within higher education institutions (Felten et al., 2023; Popenici, 2023; Popenici et al., 2023; Rudolph et al., 2024). This disruption runs deeper than technological change; it represents a fundamental challenge to educational foundations. Popenici et al. (2023) describe AI as "a spike in the heart of the model of education as we have it today," arguing that governments, institutions, and educators remain "completely unprepared" for this seismic transformation (p. 322). The complexity of this disruption is further elaborated by Rudolph et al. (2024) through their conceptualization of the "Yin and Yang: Threats and Opportunities of GenAI for higher education" (See Figure 1).

Beyond institutional disruption, AI presents immediate and material risks to educator labor, especially HEIs and NFTIs. Mehdi and Frenette (2024) note that "higher-skilled jobs may be more exposed to AI-related job transformation than lower-skilled jobs" (p. 4), situating educators squarely at the centre of this reconfiguration. Similarly, Felten et al. (2023) identify postsecondary fields such as English language and literature, foreign languages, and history among those most susceptible to AI exposure. While AI might complement certain pedagogical tasks (Mehdi & Frenette, 2024), the prospect of role erosion, task automation, and professional redefinition generates acute precarity and psychosocial strain across the academic workforce.

The threat to educators extends beyond their own job security to encompass deep-seated concerns about AI's i-
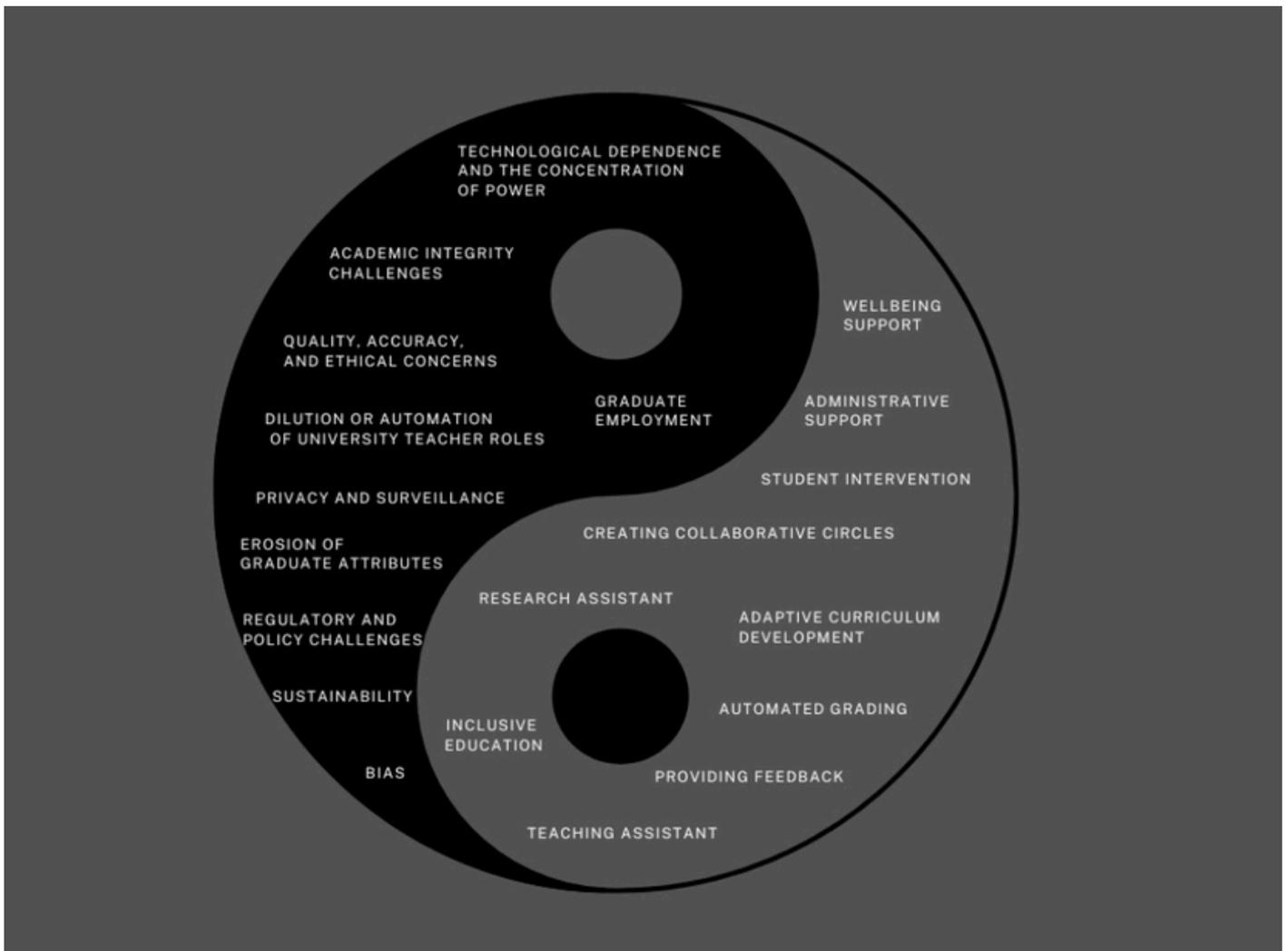
Figure 1. *Yin* and *Yang*: Threats and opportunities of GenAI for higher education (Rudolph et al., 2024, p. 3).

-mpact on student cognitive development, intensifying the psychological burden they face. Students lacking the awareness of the dangers of AI increasingly outsource their academic tasks to AI as "it can generate passable prose in seconds without triggering any plagiarism detector" (Rudolph et al., 2023, p. 353). This trend toward academic delegation carries far-reaching implications for human intellectual capacity. Rudolph et al. (2023) also warn that "as society gravitates towards an increased reliance on AI for tasks traditionally demanding human ingenuity, the threat of a diminished capacity in essential cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving among students looms" (p. 14). Gerlich (2024) also asserts the negative correlation between the frequent use of AI tools and critical thinking abilities. In Canada, in particular, more than half of the students over the age of 18 have used generative AI to complete schoolwork or pass exams (KPMG, 2023). When students increasingly rely on AI tools, their diminished engagement with deep learning processes and compromised thinking skills will eventually create even greater dependency on these technologies.

Indeed, the potential for AI to create dependency is a legitimate concern for educators navigating an evolving educational landscape. Grose (2024) cautions that "when students rely on generative AI, they lose not only the ability to think critically but also to overcome frustration with tasks that do not come easily to them" (para. 4). Excessive reliance on AI for problem-solving risks eroding students' mental resilience and their ability to confront challenges independently. The psychological implications deepen further as Hasan (2025) argues that AI not only "hampers intellectual growth but also diminishes confidence in one's own abilities over time" (p. 4693). Consequently, educators grapple not only with pedagogical challenges but also with mounting apprehension regarding the consequences of AI dependency on student development.

Policy failures threatening educator jobs

Another primary threat to the job security and well-being of HEIs and NFTIs comes directly from the Canadian government. According to the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario (n.d.), Canada is the only major industrialized country that does not have national oversight over higher education, and the federal government has no mechanism to ensure that funds are actually spent on post-secondary education. As a result, the Canadian post-secondary sector has faced chronic underfunding for decades, forcing institutions to rely heavily on international student tuition as a financial lifeline (Dhillon, 2024). This reliance is particularly problematic, as international students often come from economically disadvantaged countries such as India, the Philippines, Nigeria, etc., (CBIE, n.d.) making them vulnerable targets. The over-dependence on international students creates an unstable financial model that leaves institutions at risk during global crises or changes in immigration policies.

Experts have highlighted the systemic failure to adequately fund education while shifting the financial burden onto international students (Alexander, 2021; Breznitz, 2024; Green, 2015). This trend reflects the erosion of public investment in higher education, transforming institutions from public goods into profit-driven enterprises. For example, in the wealthiest province of Ontario, as provincial funding has steadily declined, student fees have increased and become the main source of institutions' income (See Figure 2). This model has made higher education unaffordable for both domestic and international students, compromising educational access and quality, thus affecting the future development of students.
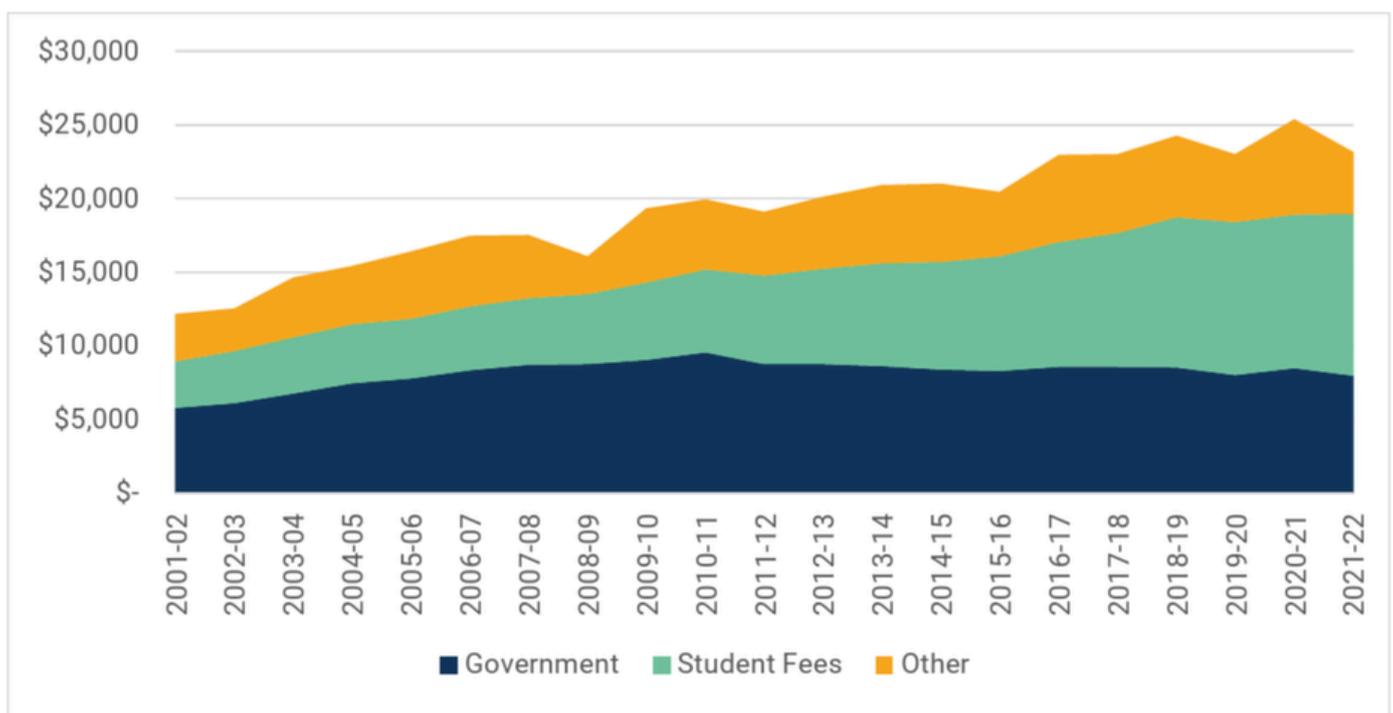

Figure 2. Total University and College Income by Source, Ontario, 2001-02 to 2021-22, Millions, in real $2021 (Usher & Balfour, 2023, p. 102).

Under this model, international students, who pay roughly five times more fees than domestic students (Statistics Canada, 2024), have effectively become the primary financial backbone of Canadian higher education. Their presence, 637,855 in 2019, 807,260 in 2022 and one million international students in 2023 (The Economic Times, 2024), significantly bolstered local and federal economies through tuition revenue, workforce contributions, and cultural enrichment (Lencioni, 2024). In 2022, international students contributed nearly $31 billion to Canada's economy and supported over 360,000 jobs (Hassan, 2024, para.11). The disproportionate dependence on their fees is particularly stark in Ontario, where Indian international students in 2023 contributed $2 billion to college operating revenues—exceeding the provincial government's entire higher education budget

allocation that year (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2023). This reliance exposes a structural inequity: students from the Global South are not merely participants in the education system but are systematically leveraged as revenue sources, effectively subsidizing domestic education while assuming disproportionate financial risk.

Despite their critical role, political leaders have deflected responsibility for the housing crisis onto these very international students and used them as scapegoats (Lencioni, 2024). In response to public pressure, right before the election, the Canadian government implemented abrupt policy changes, including capping study permits at 485,000, eliminating the public partnership program (IRCC, 2024a) and ending The Student Direct Stream (IRCC, 2024b). While framed as solutions to housing affordability, these measures merely shift the crisis from one vulnerable population to another, destabilizing the higher education sector and jeopardizing international students' future alongside the institutions that rely on their enrolment.

The financial consequences have been catastrophic. With a 54% decline in international enrolment, colleges and universities now face approximately $2 billion in jeopardized revenue (Hassan, 2024, para.12). Program closures and widespread job losses are underway (CBC News, 2024; Chandler, 2024). Amid these crises, educators are left grappling with how to safeguard their careers, maintain their mental health, and adapt to rapidly shifting landscapes. It is predicted that 20,000 job losses will result from these changing demographics (Usher, 2024b). With nearly 50,000 foreign students listed as 'no-shows' by Canadian institutions in 2025, these figures are expected to worsen (Woolf, 2025). Amid these crises, educators are left grappling with how to safeguard their careers, maintain their mental health, and adapt to a rapidly collapsing financial model.

The "Other" lives of NFTIs

In *The Undercommons* (2013), Harney and Moten critique the modern university as an exploitative institution that depends on the invisible labor of teaching professionals while simultaneously erasing their contributions: "The university needs teaching labor, despite itself, or as itself, self-identical with and thereby erased by it." (p. 26). Teaching, while foundational to the university's existence, is systematically devalued and treated as a temporary necessity rather than dignified work: "The moment of teaching for food is therefore often mistakenly taken to be a stage, as if eventually one should not teach for food." (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 27). The university seeks to eliminate the troublesome presence of these educators, who are described as the "tribe of moles," operating in the shadows to provide necessary intellectual sustenance while being erased by the very institution they support, much like capital aims to rid itself of labor.

This analysis is particularly applicable to NFTIs in Canada, where the precarious lives of educators exemplify the "tribe of moles" metaphor. Through the widespread use of short-term and contingent contracts, institutions avoid providing benefits while retaining the unilateral power to terminate employment. Despite these conditions, NFTIs continue to invest deeply in their teaching, engaging in what Paris (2024) terms "hope labour," defined as "uncompensated or undercompensated labour carried out in the hopes that the exposure, experience, or goodwill generated by this labour will lead to future employment opportunities" (para. 4). As Paris (2024) further observes, NFTIs remain especially susceptible to the affective pull of teaching—the "rush to stand before a class, holding forth on an obscure topic you know well" (2024, para. 4). Institutions strategically capitalize on this passion to suppress their wages (Paris, 2024, para. 4). In this way, universities weaponize instructors' genuine commitment to teaching, extracting maximum labour for minimal compensation. However, these dedicated educators are further alienated when their efforts to exceed narrow, market-oriented expectations are dismissed as "unprofessional" or "impractical" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 28). Within this framework, educators' labour is rendered simultaneously indispensable and disposable, orchestrated to maximize institutional gain while minimizing human and professional costs.

Reflecting on Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons* (2013), Wan (2022) poignantly captures the persistent financial vulnerability and oppressed reality of her own adjunct experience:

> … driving six hours to get to and from my two adjunct jobs, fitting ten hours of non-stop teaching in eating meals in my car, and teaching in hallways because I didn't have an office. Once, I even contemplated sleeping in my car because I didn't want to drive three hours through a snowstorm at night, and every hotel

in town was way out of my budget. Not to mention, I was still taking a full load of courses and working as a teaching assistant at my own university. So, it's fair to say I felt exhausted and completely disillusioned …. (para.2)

Reading Wan's account felt uncomfortably familiar: My own day often begins at 5 am, commuting across the Greater Toronto Area for an early morning class, only to return home in the late afternoon, drained and lifeless. In the capitalist education system, institutions often pay instructors on a "per-course basis" (Field et al., 2014, p. 5) but implicitly expect them to recruit, mentor, and engage in activities beyond their teaching hours. I routinely teach at three institutions simultaneously—partly because, as Paris (2024) observes, "teaching is addictive" (para. 4), but more fundamentally because it is teaching "for food" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 27). This arrangement reflects a deeply flawed system in which, as Wan (2022) poignantly notes, "one must work more to be nourished enough (sometimes not even), and many adjuncts quickly realize that surviving and dying happen in the same breath" (2022, para. 6).

Through the practice of deep listening (Plum Village App, 2023), I have learned that many of my colleagues—and even my esteemed adjunct professors at prestigious institutions —share similar struggles. NFTIs face persistent financial and professional vulnerability, often without the protections afforded to full-time faculty (Field et al., 2014). As immigrant policies shift and contracts are terminated abruptly, NFTIs bear the brunt of institutional instability. They are the first to be displaced when international student caps are imposed by the Canadian federal government. This deliberate reliance on contingent labor exposes a broader logic of institutional and systemic extraction, undermining not only educators' livelihoods but also the integrity, equity, and social purpose of higher education.

Beyond criticizing this exploitative system, Harney and Moten's concept of *The Undercommons* (2013) offers a glimmer of hope and a means to reclaim humanity within a dehumanizing structure. Yet before educators can foster care, collective action, or envision systemic reform, they must first sustain themselves. Attending to one's well-being amid shrinking job opportunities and systemic inequities is both an act of survival and a form of resistance. In cultivating this resilience, educators lay the foundation for transformative spaces, replenishing the strength and insight necessary to reimagine and reshape the educational landscape from within.

The interconnected nature of educator well-being

To explore the topic of well-being, many studies have been conducted to understand models of burnout and salient risk factors leading to workplace stress (Hastings & Bham, 2003). More recently, attention has shifted from "the alleviation of disorder to a focus on personal and interpersonal flourishing" (Huppert, 2009, p. 137). Regarding teachers' well-being, research suggests that it is influenced by a combination of individual, relational, and contextual factors (Collie et al., 2015; Hartcher et al., 2023; Hasnain, 2023). Key aspects of teacher well-being are interconnected with core psychological needs, including a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as autonomous motivation and organizational commitment (Collie et al., 2015). These elements are crucial for fostering a positive teaching environment and can help mitigate the adverse effects of stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout (Collie et al., 2015; Hartcher et al., 2023; Hasnain, 2023).

Evidence further highlights that improving teacher well-being leads to broader positive outcomes. Research affirms that well-being encompasses cognitive, emotional, physical, and psychological dimensions, reflecting teachers' emotions, attitudes, and evaluations of their work (Hartcher et al., 2023). On the contrary, when teachers are burnt out, students also suffer from higher stress levels, lower academic performance, and lower school satisfaction (White & Kern, 2018).

These findings align with the theory of "interbeing" in Buddhism (Grateful Living, 2015; Pluralism Project at Harvard University, 2020; Parachin, 2000; Pyles, 2005), which underscores the interconnected nature of existence. The well-being of educators directly influences the co-arising well-being of all stakeholders including students and institutions:

When this is, that is.

> This arising, that arises.
>
> When this is not, that is not.
>
> This ceasing, that ceases (Terry et al., 1993, p. 171).

By tending to their own well-being, educators not only sustain themselves but also contribute to a thriving and resilient educational ecosystem. Achieving such well-being, however, cannot be addressed with short-term remedies, as these have been proven to provide little to no lasting benefit. Instead, well-being must be pursued as a long-term, holistic goal.

Long-term strategies are essential because, as McCallum and Price (2015) note, "life-wide well-being involves a breadth of experiences, guides and locations and... takes individuals through adaptation to new situations" (p.140). In this long journey, educators must take an active role in fostering their own mental health (Hartcher et al., 2023). The next section explores practical, evidence-based strategies educators can adopt to cultivate enduring well-being, empowering them to navigate the challenges of their profession while sustaining their personal and professional growth.

The only way out is in: Cultivating inner resilience through meditation

Mindfulness is widely perceived as "receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience" (Brown et al., 2007, p.212). Through meditation, mindfulness allows us "to be aware of what is going on – in our bodies, in our feelings, in our minds, and in the world' (Thich Nhat Hanh & Neumann, 2005, p. 14). Although the field of mindfulness and meditation studies is still young (Brown et al., 2007), it has increasingly attracted researchers' and health practitioners' attention. The growing body of research reflects the significance of mindfulness in contemporary life (See Figure 3).

Mindfulness and its relationship with HEIs' and NFTIs' well-being remain an underexplored area of research. Existing studies have predominantly focused on psychological domains such as attitude and social cognition, interpersonal relations, group and personality processes, prevention and treatment, epidemiology, and the healthcare economics of behavioral therapy (Wang et al., 2021, p. 5). Therefore, this paper seeks to contribute to this emerging field by examining how mindfulness—grounded in deep self-awareness—can support educators in achieving "lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep well-being" (McCallum & Price, 2015, p. 140). The adage "the only way out is in" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2014) encapsulates this inward-turning approach.

In times of upheaval and uncertainty, the answers educators seek often reside within themselves in the form of attentive self-awareness and intentional practices that foster balance and resilience. This approach challenges the tendency to rely solely on external fixes or to wait for systems to provide solutions. Instead, it calls for individuals to reconnect with their inner resources and adopt practices that nurture mental, emotional, and spiritual health. By turning inward, HEIs and NFTIs can build the strength to navigate external challenges with more incredible poise, transforming personal well-being into a cornerstone for resilience and empowerment.

Slowing down to heal

From the above analysis, it is evident that HEIs, particularly NFTIs, find themselves trapped in cycles of relentless pace, chronic stress, and overwhelming demands. Breaking free from this destructive pattern requires a fundamental shift toward intentional deceleration and self-care. This transformation begins with cultivating a genuine commitment to pause, requiring both the courage to step away from constant motion and the discipline to engage in practices that allow both body and mind to find stillness and restoration.

The Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh, offers profound guidance for this healing journey through his understanding of the practice of stopping. In one teaching video titled "Stop Running" (Plum Village App, 2024), he illuminates the essential nature of this practice:

> "The practice of stopping is very crucial in the Buddhist tradition... There is tension in our body – a kind of
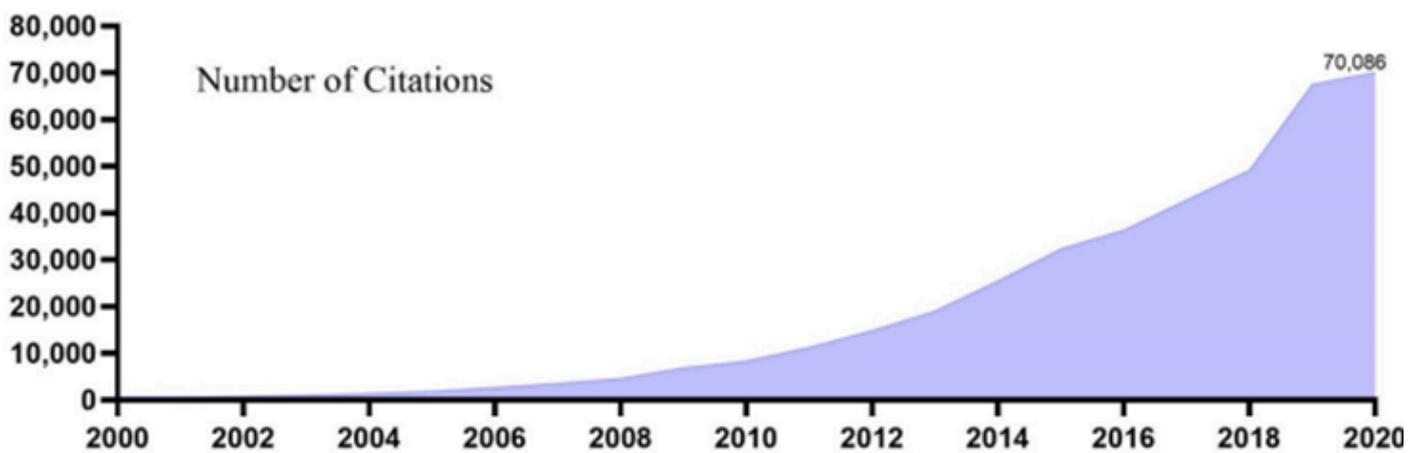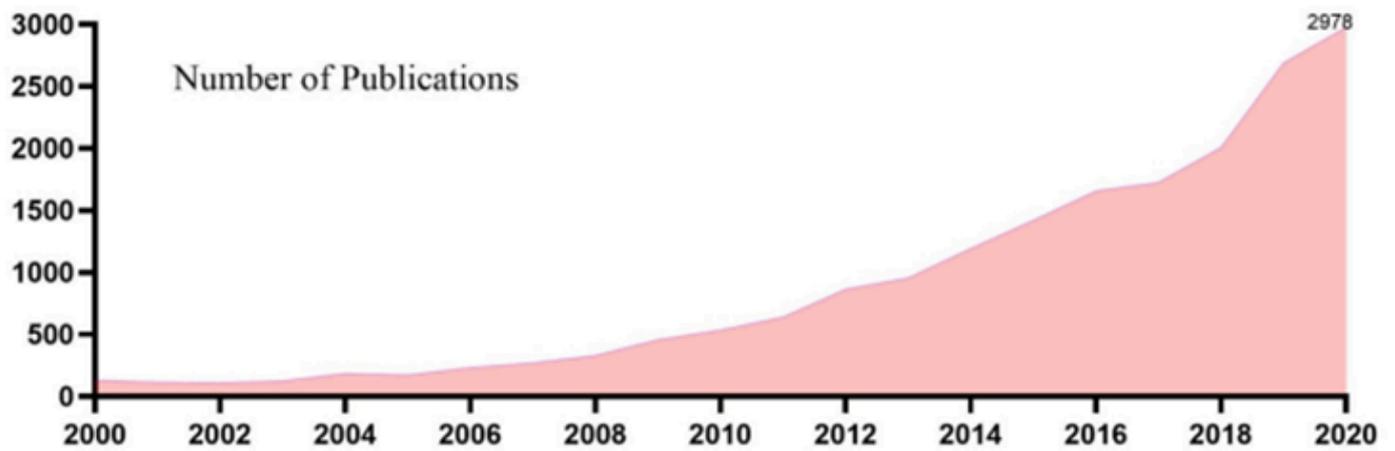
Figure 3. Mindfulness meditation publications and citations (Wang et al., 2021, p. 4).

energy that pushes you and pushes your body. Your body wants to do something, to be active, to run, to do something. Your body does not have the capacity to rest, to stop. That is why stopping does not mean just stopping the mind, but stopping the body... The body and the mind are inter-are... You practice with the body and mind at the same time. That is why meditation includes the body... The Buddhist term of stopping is 'samatha'. You are not searching for anything at all. You are completely at ease in the present moment. It sounds easy, but we need some training..." (Plum Village App, 2024)

To facilitate this deeper engagement with the body, Thich Nhat Hanh and Katherine Wear (2017) guide educators toward deep, introspective reflection through a series of probing questions:

"How do I feel right now, in my mind, body, breath? How did the sitting practice feel? Was it the same experience throughout or did it change? Where was my mind today? Stressed, calm, distracted? Where was my body? How easy or difficult did my body find just sitting? Did I want to move a lot? If I did, did I manage to move mindfully? If I noticed my mind wandering, was I able to bring it back to my breath and the present moment?" (p. 243)

The approach emphasizes open, non-judgmental self-inquiry and welcomes all responses, including uncertainty. Rather than demanding immediate transformation, it offers gentle redirection toward present-moment awareness, enabling educators to cultivate deeper self-understanding, release accumulated tension, and discover clarity amidst the chaos of professional demands.

The transformative potential of these practices becomes tangible through Wong's (2018) deep personal account in *"Please Call Me by My True Names": A Decolonizing Pedagogy of Mindfulness and Interbeing in Critical Social Work Education* (Wong, 2018). The practices of mindful breathing, walking, reflecting on purpose, and eating offer pathways for Wong and her students to nurture their inner well-being. Integrating mindfulness pedagogy into her Social Work course, Wong and like-minded educators create a framework for orienting themselves, embracing vulnerability, and preparing their students to confront the challenges and discomforts inherent in the learning process. She helps her students turn inward and feel "more grounded, more present, and more aware" (Wong, 2018, p. 269). Perhaps most powerfully, Wong (2018) models the courage required for authentic healing when she reflects on her personal experience: "stopped writing [the chapter] to allow the body to heal," recognizing this pause as both mindful and necessary (p. 217). Through this process, she learned to cease negating her body and spirit, embracing a holistic approach to healing and teaching that aligns with the principles of mindfulness and interbeing. Her practice stands as a compelling testament to the possibility of transformation, offering educators both inspiration and practical guidance for integrating mindfulness into their pedagogy while prioritizing their own well-being as the essential foundation for genuinely transformative teaching.

Dealing with strong emotions through breathing and walking meditation

In the current difficult times, strong emotions can often feel overwhelming, and mindful practice can be a practical way to process and embrace these feelings. Thich Nhat Hanh (2017) explains:

> When the seed of anger in us is touched, and when it manifests in our mental consciousness as the energy of anger, we have to be aware of it right away. First, we have to produce mindfulness to be aware that the energy of anger is coming up. That is the practice of mindfulness of anger. Breathing in, I know I am angry. Breathing out, I know that anger has manifested. You continue to follow your in-breath and out-breath, generating the energy of mindfulness to embrace your anger. You might like to do walking meditation to help you continue to generate the power of mindfulness. (para.1)

By aligning each step with the breath, educators can create a moving meditation that grounds them in the present moment. This practice offers a unique opportunity to manage stress and cultivate emotional resilience. Walking slowly and deliberately in a quiet space, with attention focused on the sensations of the feet touching the ground, can release emotional burdens and nurture inner peace. As Thich Nhat Hanh beautifully articulated, "healing is possible with every step… There is no way to healing, healing is the way" (Plum Village, 2013).

Mindful practices are not about escaping strong emotions but embracing them with compassion and understanding. This practice equips educators to face their challenges with greater emotional resilience, transforming their responses to stressful situations. Research supports the profound impact of mindfulness on emotional resilience and decision-making. In a study involving 116 monks and nuns who serve as leaders and educators, Burmansah et al. (2024) suggest mindfulness helps leaders and educators become fully present and aware of both internal and external challenges. By cultivating this awareness, they can pause, observe, and listen deeply to the situation at hand. This mindful approach significantly influences how individuals and organizations respond to problems, fostering creativity in finding solutions. It also promotes self-transformation and social change by encouraging the development of new habits. Additionally, the ability to manage conflict effectively is closely linked to mindfulness, as it helps individuals adopt life principles that enable them to lead with resilience, insight, and adaptability. By incorporating meditation into their routines, educators can create a foundation of emotional resilience, cultivate inner peace, and transform their responses to stress. This simple yet powerful practice provides a pathway to self-healing and developing creative and compassionate leadership in education and beyond.

In *Being Peace*, Thich Nhat Hanh illuminates the fundamental Buddhist understanding that life encompasses both profound suffering and extraordinary beauty, grounding this teaching in contemporary realities: "Each day 40,000 children die of hunger. The superpowers now have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads… Yet the sunrise is beautiful, and the rose that bloomed this morning … a miracle" (Thich Nhat Hanh & Neumann, 2005, p.14). This perspective is valuable as it allows educators to see what is rather than what is not and take on challenges with

more resilience. What is more important is how our inner peace and contentment can determine the state of our lives, not external factors that try to overwhelm us: "If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace." (Thich Nhat Hanh & Neumann, 2005, p. 13). This understanding reveals how personal transformation ripples outward, making individual healing an act of service to the educational community.

To cultivate this transformative peace, Thich Nhat Hanh offers a deceptively simple meditation that integrates breath, presence, and joy:

> Breathing in, I calm my body.
>
> Breathing out, I smile.
>
> Dwelling in the present moment
>
> I know this is a wonderful moment. (Thich Nhat Hanh & Neumann, 2005, p. 15)

This meditation chant allows practitioners, including novice beginners, to focus attention on their own breath and the present moment. Each chant corresponds to one full inhalation and exhalation, allowing the breath and the accompanying smile to serve as a gentle reminder that we are alive and fully awake to this yet wonderful life. Simple but profound, this practice offers educators an accessible anchor amid chaos, providing a reliable path back to centeredness regardless of external circumstances.

The theme of liberation through presence continues in "How to Walk," where Thich Nhat Hanh (2014) observes that "Most of us walk without chains, yet we aren't free" (p. 60). This paradox speaks directly to the educator's experience—physically mobile yet mentally imprisoned by regrets about past decisions and anxieties about future outcomes. By focusing on each step and each breath, educators can practice bringing the mind "home" to the body, breaking free from the mental prisons they construct. Thich Nhat Hanh provides walking meditation verses that serve as gentle mantras for this homecoming:

> I have arrived.
>
> I am home
>
> In the here,
>
> In the now
>
> I am solid
>
> I am free
>
> In the ultimate
>
> I dwell (Thich Nhat Hanh 2014, p. 102)

Each line is chanted in rhythm with a step, grounding the practitioner in embodied presence. Walking meditation emerged during the height of the Vietnam War, when Thich Nhat Hanh engaged in peace work amidst extreme violence and upheaval. In such overwhelming conditions, still meditation was often impossible; walking meditation allowed body and mind to unite amid distress and emotion.

For educators navigating their own high-stakes, stressful environments, the practices of breathing and walking meditation offer simple yet concrete pathways to cultivate inner resilience and well-being. By deepening self-awareness and mindfulness, they develop the emotional and spiritual resources necessary to meet external cha-

-llenges with equanimity. Human life is sustained by the fundamental acts of breathing and movement—how extraordinary these basic capacities, to walk and to breathe, and themselves become means of freedom and inner peace.

Implementing well-being initiatives in higher education

Although practical research on mindfulness and well-being in HEIs remains emergent (Brown et al., 2007), existing studies provide clear evidence of feasibility and impact. For example, Flook et al. (2013) examined a mindfulness program designed specifically for teachers and observed significant reductions in psychological distress and burnout, alongside improvements in sustained attention and emotional regulation—capacities directly related to effective teaching. Extending this work, Hirshberg et al. (2020) reported on a structured nine-week mindfulness and connection-based intervention integrated into preservice teacher education. Using objective classroom observations (CLASS), the study demonstrated measurable improvements in instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization six months after the intervention. These findings demonstrate that mindfulness can be operationalized within educational systems, linking educators' internal well-being to observable pedagogical outcomes.

Therefore, greater systemic effort is required to address educator burnout and sustain teaching effectiveness in postsecondary settings. One promising direction involves integrating structured mindfulness programs, professional development workshops, and wellness resources into institutional policies to ensure faculty have ongoing and equitable access to support. International initiatives such as CARE for Teachers, SMART-in-Education, Inner Resilience, Mindfulness, Courage, and Reflection for Educators, Mindful Schools, and PassageWorks' *Soul of Education* offer replicable policy models (Roeser et al., 2012). These programs incorporate concrete practices including mindful instructional strategies, breath-awareness meditation, mindfulness meditation, loving-kindness and forgiveness practices, progressive body scans, mindful movement, staff retreats, individual stress-reduction sessions, and school-based professional development workshops (Roeser et al., 2012, p. 169). Many also emphasize the integration of play, ritual, stillness, expressive arts, community-building, reflective practice, and the cultivation of "teaching presence" (Roeser et al., 2012, p. 169).

Some universities in Canada, such as the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, are already implementing yoga and meditation outreach programs for students, recognizing the benefits of mindfulness in reducing stress and improving focus (Rise & Realign, n.d.). The sessions offered allow participants, primarily teachers in training, to check in and "listen to and respect body and mind" (Rise & Realign, n.d.). Such initiatives demonstrate how well-being practices can be normalized within academic cultures.

While institutional policies play a critical role in supporting educator well-being, mindfulness practices need not wait for large-scale structural reform. Educators can initiate meaningful change at the classroom and collegial levels through intentional, accessible practices that cultivate presence, connection, and care. In my own teaching, I begin each class with a brief grounding meditation to help both students and myself transition from the pace of commuting and external pressures into a state of focused presence. When approached in a secular and inclusive manner, such practices respect diverse beliefs while fostering attentiveness, emotional regulation, and receptivity to learning. These small but deliberate interventions contribute to classroom environments that prioritize well-being, resilience, and sustainability. Embedding these moments of care into teaching spaces exemplifies the *undercommons* in practice, transforming spaces shaped by institutional exploitation into sites for mindfulness, presence, and human connection.

Beyond individual classrooms, faculty can cultivate grassroots mindfulness communities through shared practices such as mindful walking, tea meditation, or reflective dialogue circles. These spaces exemplify the *undercommons* in action, allowing educators to reclaim agency, solidarity, and relational care within institutions structured to exploit and marginalize them. Integrated into teaching and collegial life, educators not only sustain their own well-being but also practice a deliberate form of resistance to assert presence, humanity, and self-determination amid the precarity and disposability imposed by neoliberal academic structures.

Conclusion

Teaching is widely recognized as a high-stress profession, and Canadian HEIs, particularly NFTIs, are confronting intensified pressures shaped by automation, chronic underfunding, and abrupt policy shifts. These conditions have deepened employment precarity while systematically marginalizing educators' well-being. Drawing on Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons*, this paper has critiqued the neoliberal transformation of universities, exposing how institutional priorities increasingly privilege efficiency, profitability, and measurable outputs over relational labor, pedagogical care, and human sustainability.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that educator well-being must be recognized as a structural and ethical imperative. Without mental, emotional, and physical resilience, educators' capacity to teach effectively, support students, or engage meaningfully in institutional transformation is severely constrained. Mindfulness practices, grounded in attentive self-awareness and embodied presence, offer concrete pathways to cultivate such resilience. Practices such as conscious breathing, walking meditation, and reflective pauses allow educators to reclaim agency, sustain themselves within precarious systems, and assert humanity in spaces designed to render them expendable. As Nhat Hanh (2008) writes, liberation emerges through learning to "live fully awake, joyfully and freshly, at ease and in peace" (p. 48). When integrated into the fissures of academic life, these practices allow educators not only to endure but to quietly rehumanize the institutions they inhabit.

To advance educator well-being more broadly, institutions must embed it into strategic planning, collective agreements, and quality assurance frameworks rather than treating it as optional or individualized. Policies should ensure equitable access to well-being resources, integrate evidence-based mindfulness practices into faculty development and teacher education, and legitimize grassroots, faculty-led initiatives without instrumentalizing them. Crucially, time for care-based practices must be protected, and the emotional and relational labor of teaching recognized. Well-being must be decoupled from narrow productivity metrics and affirmed as an ethical responsibility essential to sustaining educational quality, institutional integrity, and long-term academic resilience.

Yet educators cannot wait for institutions to act, as reforms may be performative or delayed. Through grassroots mindfulness and attentiveness, educators can realign their professional aspirations with authentic purpose, establish protective boundaries against burnout, and cultivate collective resilience. This inward turn does not signal withdrawal from institutional life; rather, it generates a ripple effect that strengthens educational communities. In an era of deep uncertainty and growing inequity, the *undercommons* approach to care becomes essential for sustaining a more just, humane, and resilient higher education system. Educators' personal and collective inner strength thus function simultaneously as survival strategies and transformative acts, nurturing the capacity to reimagine and reshape the educational landscape from within.

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