

Academic Paper

The impact of coaching doctoral students at a university in London

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of coaching doctoral students at a university in London. A mixed methods approach was taken to identify themes which emerged from coaching conversations and the impact of coaching on these. All participants reported positively on their experience, highlighting that coaching enabled action, developed confidence and improved personal effectiveness. Some participants reported that coaching improved their wellbeing. This study suggests ways in which coaching helps postgraduate research students to address challenges they are facing and makes recommendations for the university where the study took place.

Keywords

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Introduction

There are a growing number of reports which show a decline in the wellbeing of UK students with serious incidents of suicide and stress related disorders being reported (UUK, 2015). Additionally, Government has released a statement on its vision for a “shared society” highlighting the need for individuals and communities to support each other, remove barriers and increase solidarity (May, 2017). As a result, higher education institutions are giving more consideration to how they support the mental health of their students (Stanton, Zanzvliet, Dhaliwal & Black, 2016). It is important to note here that there is very little research at present which specifically looks at the wellbeing of doctoral students in the UK. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is looking to address this in its national study, “Exploring the Wellbeing and Mental Health and Associate Support Services for Postgraduate Researchers,” the outcome of which will be published in 2018.

The university where this study took place prioritises the wellbeing of its student body by recognising it as both a moral imperative and a pre-requisite of academic success. To take this forward, as well as the traditional support services available to students, the Graduate School at this university also has remit to support the wellbeing of research students. A range of workshops and activities specifically designed to develop resilience, manage stress and enhance motivation have been implemented by the School as part of its professional skills provision and a new doctoral student coaching programme was introduced in 2016. The coaching programme operates via self-referral and is independent from academic departments.

Students who wish to work with a qualified coach are provided with up to four coaching sessions, over a period of about six months.

The coaches who coach as part of this School's coaching programme have all completed or are working towards the Institute of Leadership and Management Level 5 certificate of coaching and mentoring. The coaching approach is mainly facilitative, with coaches having specialist knowledge on research degrees and the postgraduate student experience which is used to enable students to identify actions to address the challenges they face (Schwarz, 2016). This study explores the impact of this particular coaching programme and how it helped to address some of the challenges and issues facing doctoral students at this London-based university.

What do we already know about the benefits of coaching in the higher education sector?

There are studies which provide evidence that coaching has a positive impact on academic staff within higher education. For example, coaching has been shown to enhance academic staff career advancement, scholarly confidence, collaborative work, skills development and action planning (Roofe & Miller, 2015). However, there is limited research on the impact of coaching doctoral students specifically (McCarthy, 2012). This literature review presents four key articles of relevance to this study.

In 2003, Grant conducted a study with 20 postgraduate students at an Australian University. The participants were invited to complete a pre-coaching survey requiring them to identify three goals to work towards. Following completion of the coaching programme, end of programme questionnaires were completed and the data analysed. The results identified that participants associated coaching with increased goal attainment and self-awareness. Participants also reported that as a consequence of coaching, levels of stress, depression and anxiety were reduced and that overall quality of life had improved. However, it should be noted that goal attainment was self-reported by participants who may have wished to report positively on the outcome of the coaching programme. Further, the research design did not include triangulation of goal attainment which would have strengthened the robustness of this piece of research.

In 2012, Richardson, Abraham & Bond carried out a meta-analysis of factors which contribute towards academic success. They identified 41 factors which directly correlate with grade performance and the strongest of these was self-efficacy. Richardson et al (2012) identified that prior academic performance and demographic factors also contributed towards academic success but to a lesser degree. Other studies show that personality traits impact on academic achievement and that conscientiousness has a particularly strong correlation with grade performance (Komarraju, Karau, & Schmeck, 2009). Finally, the importance of socioeconomic skills or non-cognitive skills such as perseverance and motivation have also been shown to impact positively on academic achievement (Kyllonen, 2012). Although Grant's 2003 study took place prior to these studies, it is important to recognise that these factors or characteristics play an important part in academic success. It may not therefore be possible to attribute academic success to coaching alone.

In 2010, Geber published research which claimed that coaching accelerates research productivity in higher education. Geber's study explored the impact of coaching on 8 early career researchers at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. Geber (2010) analysed the themes which emerged during participant interviews and was able to demonstrate that coaching improved student supervisor partnerships, increased participant self-awareness and contributed towards career progression. Geber also attributed an increase in tangible research outcomes, such as number of research publications, completion of research milestones and successful grant applications, to the coaching programme.

Geber is a coaching practitioner and was employed by the University of Witwatersrand to lead the coaching programme. This naturally introduces bias into the research and Geber does not mention the

steps she took to mitigate for this or her influence on the research as a coaching practitioner. Furthermore, there is no mention of whether Geber (2010) addressed the fact that participants would perceive her as person of authority and that this may have influenced the way in which participants reported the outcome of the coaching programme. Finally, the findings of Geber's (2010) study are unlikely to be applied more widely because the number of participants in the sample was small.

In 2016, Andreanoff examined the impact of a peer coaching intervention on the academic attainment of undergraduate students at a university in the south of England. Andreanoff (2016) compared the grades of participants who had been coached (experimental group) with the grades of participants who had not been coached (control group). Participants were also invited to complete a questionnaire which explored their academic behaviour. In total there were 150 completed questionnaires for the coached group and 93 completed questionnaires for the control group, all of which were statistically analysed. The results of Andreanoff's (2016) study indicate that following coaching, there was a statistically significant increase in the experimental group's satisfaction with academic progress, perception of how they managed their course requirements and an increase in satisfaction with student life. Further, the results of the study also showed that there was a small but statistically significant increase in grades for the experimental group.

Andreanoff (2016) reported that one of the limitations to the study was that it was impossible to choose a control and experimental group who shared exactly the same characteristics. Another limitation was that the increase in academic attainment may have been as a result of the passage of time rather than attributable to a coaching intervention alone. At no point does the study take account of prior academic performance or socioeconomic background, both of which are key factors in academic attainment (Crawford, 2014). Nor does the study reflect on the findings of Richardson et al., (2012), Komarraju et al., (2009) or Kyllonen, (2012) as mentioned earlier. Further Robbins, Lauver, Davis, Langley & Carlstrom (2004) also found that academic self-efficacy and motivation to achieve also influenced grade point average and academic progress.

Finally, although Andreanoff's (2016) sample size is much larger than that used in Geber's study, and one could argue that the mixed methods approach strengthens the robustness, credibility and reliability of Andreanoff's (2016) study, it should be noted that Andreanoff is also a coaching practitioner and it is not clear what steps were taken to address this bias or her influence on the research as a coaching practitioner.

In 2016, Godskensen & Kobayashi, carried out a mixed methods review of the benefits of coaching 88 doctoral students at the Technical University of Denmark. Following coaching, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire about their experience. The study found that the majority of participants reported coaching to be a positive experience and prompted new reflections. In terms of themes which emerged, most participants revealed they discussed many more topics with their coach than with their supervisor and reported that coaching assisted with time management issues, personal issues and emotional issues. The study also claimed that for those students who had thought about quitting their doctoral programme, coaching had influenced them staying. A limitation of the study was the fact that there was much interest from students to take part in the research and that therefore this generated participants who were likely to report favourably on the outcome of coaching.

This review of the literature suggests that coaching can be beneficial to the academic community, can help to improve relationships and develop research and professional skills. There is also a perception that academic attainment, progression and output may also be influenced positively by coaching, although prior academic success, self-efficacy and other factors may play part in this.

Methodology

This section of this paper describes the methodological approach designed for this study. It begins by setting out the conceptual framework. It then moves on to describe the research design and ends with a discussion of the limitations of the study.

Conceptual Framework

Coaching research within the higher education sector, although limited with respect to doctoral education, does indicate that there are likely to be positive benefits for students who undertake coaching programmes, not only with respect to academic progression but also in terms of wellbeing. This study therefore explores two key questions:

1. What were the challenges and issues for participants of the study?
2. Did coaching have a positive impact on these?

A mixed methods approach was taken to address these questions. Firstly, data was collected via semi-structured interviews and secondly participants were invited to complete a short hard-copy end of programme questionnaire. Introducing triangulation into the design of this research was done so that the rich qualitative data obtained via interviews could be merged with the findings of the hard-copy questionnaires to strengthen the robustness of the study and provide a clearer understanding of the research problem. (Creswell, Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003).

Participant Selection

All alumni of the doctoral student coaching programme received an email inviting them to participate in the study. Participants were provided with an information sheet setting out further particulars and making it clear that they were under no obligation to take part and could withdraw from the study at any time. Given the small pool of potential participants (at the time of the study there were only 8 alumni of the coaching programme), all who wished to participate were able to do so. There was no selection procedure or criteria. Of the 8 potential participants, 5 confirmed that they were happy to take part in the study. Once signed consent forms were received, individual participant interviews were arranged.

Participant Interviews

Participants were assigned a number to preserve their anonymity. In order to prepare for the interviews, each was told in advance that the session would last one hour and would be conducted by a trained coach who was also the researcher. The semi-structured interviews followed a planned interview schedule and took place in private tutorial rooms, away from distraction and secure from interruption. Each participant was asked the same standard opening questions to establish their profile. Thought was given to collecting participant profile-building data via an online pre-interview survey but this would have been an additional time commitment for participants so was decided against. Following the profile building questions, the remainder of each interview was unstructured. At the end of the interview, each participant was invited to complete a questionnaire about their experience of the coaching programme. This was done to triangulate the findings from the interviews.

The interviews were not recorded, instead notes were taken by the researcher. To support the accuracy of note-taking, the researcher used coaching techniques designed to slow the pace of conversation. For example, opportunity was taken to pause and reflect and this also provided a calm environment for the participants. The process of reflection also allowed a check to be made that the themes raised by participants were correctly interpreted by the researcher. Once the interviews were completed, each participant was sent a copy of the notes and invited to confirm that they were happy that the notes were a true reflection of the conversation.

The data contained within the interview notes was then cleaned and coded. Key sentences which related to the impact of coaching were highlighted and each issue or challenge raised by the participants was grouped into a theme. For example, all issues relating to professional skills were highlighted in one colour, challenges relating to the student supervisor partnership another, and so on. This thematic coding was a helpful way in which to establish a framework for the results (Gibbs, 2007). Thematic coding was carried

out only after all the interviews had been completed to avoid any pre-conceived ideas and bias entering the data clean up.

Limitations

When conducting the interviews, it was important for the researcher to build rapport and trust with the participants. This was a challenge given it was the first-time that the researcher had met many of the participants. It is therefore feasible that participants may not have felt comfortable revealing the full extent of challenges they were facing. If the original coaches who coached the participants through the coaching programme carried out the interviews, it may have provided richer data but this may have also introduced bias as the coaches would want their coachees to report positively on the outcome of coaching, thereby highlighting their skills as a coach.

Another obvious limitation to the study is the sample size which is small. As the coaching programme develops at this university, and there is a larger sample size available, it would be helpful to repeat the study. Another limitation is that the study does not take account of other support services available at the institution which students made have accessed. For example, participants may have accessed the Student Counselling Service or participated in other professional skills training courses incorporating stress management or perhaps resilience, which could have supported them through their particular challenge. Therefore any positive impact reported by participants may also have been attributable to these support services rather than coaching alone. This was not explored.

The participant profile information collected during the interviews did not include information about factors such as socioeconomic background, prior academic achievement, ethnicity etc. As previously mentioned in the literature review, these factors have been identified by Richardson et al., (2012), Komarraju et al., (2009), Kyllonen, (2012) & Robbins et al.,(2004) as important influencers of academic attainment, self-efficacy and motivation and may well have impacted on the findings of this study.

The findings and experiences described in the study are told from a students' perspective. At no point are the participants' supervisors viewpoints sought which would have helped to triangulate the results. Although this was considered in the early stages of the research design, it was decided against due to ethical reasons and potential to reveal the identity of participants. Finally, the researcher is herself a coaching practitioner and also responsible for the coaching programme at this university. This of course introduces bias because she would want to report positively on the outcomes of this research and the impact of coaching. Further participants were aware that the researcher was responsible for the coaching programme and therefore, may have felt obliged to comment favourably on the impact of coaching.

Results

The results section is divided into three parts. The first section provides details of the participant profiles, the second shows the results of the end of programme questionnaire and the final section provides details of the participant interviews.

Participant profiles

There were 2 female late stage participants, 1 female mid stage participant and 2 male mid stage participants.

Results of the end of programme questionnaire

Table 1 shows the results of the end of programme questionnaire for all 5 participants. Participants were asked to consider each statement and mark whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed or

strongly agreed with each statement. The option to mark “not applicable,” was also given. Participants were only able to choose one response for each statement. The first row of Table 1 shows the response options available for each statement. The remainder of Table 1 shows the statements which participants were asked to respond to and the total number of participants who chose each response option.

Table 1: Results of the end of programme questionnaire

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Non applicable
I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses as a result of the coaching programme.	0	0	2	3	0
I am more effective in dealing with difficult people and situations as a result of the coaching programme.	0	0	2	3	0
I have increased my personal effectiveness as a result of the coaching programme.	0	0	2	3	0
I am more aware of the impact of my behaviour on others as a result of the coaching programme.	0	0	2	1	2
I am more effective in my ability to manage stakeholder expectations as a result of the coaching programme.	0	0	3	2	0
I am more confident overall as a result of the coaching programme.	0	0	1	4	0
The coaching programme has helped me achieve my objective(s).	0	0	0	5	0>

Participant interview outcomes

This section sets out the themes which emerged from the participant interviews. As previously mentioned the challenges facing participants were coded and grouped. The data presented also shows how participants reported the impact of the coaching programme. The main themes highlighted by participants were; developing professional skills, overcoming challenges with the student supervisor partnership, developing a sense of community and life beyond the PhD. Sub-themes have been included, where appropriate.

Developing professional skills

Time management skills

Participant 2 hoped that coaching would improve her time management skills, in particular to ensure that she submitted her thesis on time. Participant 2 reported that coaching helped her to achieve this. Participant 3 also wanted to improve his time management skills so that he could move forward with his research and set himself realistic deadlines.

Writing skills

Following feedback from her supervisor, participant 1 was concerned with the way in which she articulated her written work. As a result of coaching, participant 1 confirmed that she was now “more confident in herself in terms of presenting her scientific arguments” and that she had taken “practical actions” to

address this issue. Participant 1 reported that as a result of coaching she decided to check her own work against other academic papers giving her the confidence to write. Participant 2 also wanted to improve her writing skills.

Overcoming procrastination and perfectionism

Participant 3 wished to explore how he could be more productive, motivated and overcome procrastination. Participant 3 described how he was not productive on a day-to-day basis and found it difficult to move forward with his research. He tended to take action right before a deadline but if left on his own would procrastinate. Participant 3 believed himself to be a perfectionist which was compounding the other issues he described. He set himself unrealistic goals and subsequent failure to achieve these was making him feel depressed. Participant 3 responded positively when asked if the coaching programme had helped in anyway. He reported that coaching had helped him to understand why he behaved in certain ways which then enabled him to think about changing his behaviour and to develop practical solutions to move forward.

Overcoming challenges with the student supervisor partnership

Relationship breakdown

Participant 1 was very “distressed” with the poor relationship she had with her supervisor. In her words, she felt that “her supervisor was coming down on her hard, sabotaging her PhD and was generally giving up on her.” Participant 1 reported that she “felt bullied” and was “fearful of repercussion.” She also indicated that the relationship with her supervisor had now deteriorated and that it had “gone too far and was beyond fixing.” In response to whether coaching helped her to address this issue, participant 1 reported that coaching enabled her to develop confidence in her own ability and move forward.

Participant 2 reported that she also “felt bullied” by her supervisor and was not sure “who to turn to for support.” Participant 2 stated that, “at times, she felt discriminated against, perhaps because she was a young woman.” When she raised concerns with her department, they were not able to help her. When thinking back to how the coaching programme supported her, participant 2 reported that “coaching provided a safe place in which to raise concerns with a neutral, objective person and someone who was not in the department.” Participant 2 reported that coaching provided her with “a better appreciation of others’ learning styles and approaches which was not something that she had considered before.” She remarked that she was able to use this understanding to step back and be more objective about her situation and move forward. Participant 5 reported that she found her supervisor to be “controlling,” and when she attempted to seek help and support from others, her supervisor stopped her.

Feeling undervalued

Participant 5 felt “overlooked in the lab” and that her supervisor was not interested in her work. She reported that she would “take one step forward and four steps back.” In response to whether coaching enabled participant 5 to address these challenges, she stated that “coaching helped me to improve my situation because I feel able to take things forward myself.” Participant 2 also reported that she did not “feel like a priority” to her supervisor.

Communicating with supervisors

Although not an original objective for coaching, participant 2 reported that because of coaching, she “changed her approach” when communicating verbally with her supervisor, using language which was more “empathetic and considerate of her supervisor’s perspective.” This helped to improve her relationship with her supervisor.

Participant 4 wanted to explore how he could communicate more effectively with his supervisor. He reported that the actual process of coaching had enabled him to move forward and pushed him to act.

Participant 4 also reported that coaching gave him the confidence to talk to his supervisor and seek clarification whereas previously he had worried about having a different opinion to his supervisor. Participant 4 stated, "I communicated to my supervisor and changed my approach, it worked." He remarked that his supervisor was naturally much happier with him as a result.

Participant 5 reported that she wished to be more assertive when communicating with her supervisor. She reported that she found it difficult to talk through issues because she did not wish to offend or upset anyone. Participant 5 reported that she explored the different types of assertiveness and the Karpman Drama Triangle with her coach and that both tools helped her to understand that she could be more confident and assertive when communicating with her supervisor.

Working effectively with supervisors

In all cases, participants referred to their supervisors in terms of improving the way in which they worked with others. Participant 3 reported that coaching helped him to develop self-awareness and work more effectively with his supervisor. Participant 2 also reported that she had a greater sense of self-awareness as a result of coaching and this enabled her to improve the way she worked with her supervisor. Participant 5 reported that coaching helped her to identify her own core values and what was important to her as an individual. This helped her to understand that her supervisor's values may have been different to hers and that was completely normal. She was able to accept this and move forward.

Developing a sense of community

Participant 4 reported that the university can be antisocial, with limited opportunity to talk to people informally outside "your home department." He would have welcomed more interdepartmental events. Participant 4 also stated that the postgraduate community should have more visibility and that he would like to have had the opportunity to learn more about what other PhD students are researching and to celebrate others' research. Participant 5 remarked that the university was a "lonely place" and that the student community was lacking. Participant 5 did not report on whether the coaching programme helped to address this particular challenge. Participant 1 reported that she felt that the university was like "a wall" and that she felt very alone. She was glad that the coaching programme provided her with support to be able to overcome the feeling that the university was like a "glass-house."

Life beyond the PhD

Making time for yourself

Participant 2 stated that "coaching helped her to think about herself as a person and what she needed to do to unwind." She remarked that she "learned to make space for herself and to appreciate that she is more than just a PhD." Participant 2 also stated that she was "much happier overall as a result of coaching and that she can look back at her time at the university in a more positive way." She ended by stating that "the PhD is not the centre of her world and that there is life outside."

Working whilst studying

Participant 2 reported that although she had a good overall experience at the university, and a supportive peer group, she found it stressful to work full-time as a Research Assistant as well as trying to complete her PhD.

Wellness and good mental health

Participant 1 reported that coaching helped her to cope with panic attacks. She reported that coaching improved her "overall state of mind and confidence" and that she felt less anxious overall because of coaching. Participant 5 reported that "there is a lot of pressure at the university" but coaching helped her to feel like there is "hope for the future and that "life beyond the PhD looks positive."

Career development

Participant 5 discussed career development with her coach. She reported that she used coaching to explore different options and what teaching opportunities were available at the university. She also discussed working outside of academia with her coach.

Discussion

The next section of this paper discusses the results in light of the research questions. As a reminder, the questions were:

1. What were the challenges and issues for participants of the study?
2. Did coaching have a positive impact on these?

Developing professional skills

The findings of this study suggest that participants perceive coaching as an effective tool for developing professional skills such as time management and writing skills and overcoming procrastination and perfectionism. The development of such skills is an important part of the research degree experience and is necessary for individuals to progress their research and prepare for a broad range of careers within and outside of academia (Devine et al., 2013). Competition for academic jobs is fierce (Lynch, 2007). This is compounded when you consider that there are now many more doctoral graduates in the UK than ever before with a continued increase expected (HEFCE, 2009). Nationally, the rate of entry level academic positions remains stable and is not increasing in line with the number of doctoral graduates. At the same time, the rise of the PhD is something which is also echoed world-wide and has little sign of slowing (Cyranoski et al., 2011). For a long time, a PhD was considered to be a pre-cursor to an academic career but now many doctoral graduates are exploring other career options (Lynch, 2007). With that in mind, it is imperative that universities continue to provide opportunity for doctoral students to enhance and develop their personal skills and attributes which are of most value to employers. This study suggests that coaching may be an appropriate mechanism to develop such skills and aligns with previous studies which also indicate that coaching contributes towards the development of personal and research skills (Olivero et al., 1997, Simpson, 2010, Geber 2010, and Roofe & Miller, 2013).

It is interesting that participants in this study chose to develop their professional skills with a coach rather than with their supervisor. This could indicate that participants did not feel comfortable admitting to their supervisor that they needed to improve these skills, or perhaps developing professional skills was not seen by some supervisors, as a valuable use of time. Conversely, it could suggest in fact, that participants had agreed with their supervisor that coaching was the most appropriate way to support the development of such skills. The reasons why doctoral students chose to develop professional skills with a coach rather than with their supervisors was not explored in this study.

Overcoming challenges with the student supervisor partnership

Participants wished to explore how they could work more effectively with their supervisor and improve the way in which they communicated, in particular being more confident and assertive. In all cases, participants stated that they had improved these skills and their self-awareness as a result of coaching. Participants also reported that coaching developed their confidence and faith in their own ability which had helped them to move forward. Improvements in self-awareness enabled participants to adjust their approach when communicating and working with their supervisor. Participants also remarked that coaching was a safe place in which to talk through such challenges away from their academic department. Understanding how individuals within the partnership prefer to communicate, raising awareness of personal styles and how feedback will be delivered will contribute to an effective partnership. Having these sorts of discussions up front should enable students to feel confident to speak out when things are not

clear or to share alternative viewpoints without fear of repercussion. This aligns with Geber's 2010 study which indicates that coaching can support the development of improved student supervisor partnerships.

During coaching, participants spoke about relationship breakdown and feeling undervalued by their supervisors. It is clear that when the student supervisor partnership is working well, supervisors are able to provide support to their students on a range of academic and in some cases pastoral issues and that life-long friendships are formed. Some supervisors are clearly able to provide their students with a lot more guidance and support than others and this can highlight inconsistencies in what students can expect from their partnership. This study indicates that when students perceive the partnership going wrong, it is quite often because there is a breakdown in communication between the supervisor and student or there is a lack of understanding from either party on how the partnership will work. Given this relationship is so fundamental to the research progression and experience of students, when difficulties arise with respect to the partnership, it can be difficult for students to raise their concerns directly with their supervisor. So, once again, it is not surprising that participants wanted to discuss these sorts of issues with an independent coach. These findings highlight the importance of agreeing mutual expectations for how the student supervisor partnership will work right from the start and re-visiting these at key points throughout the partnership. Setting aside dedicated time to discuss how the partnership is working will also help to ensure that students feel valued.

It is also worth exploring the power dynamics which exist between a student and their supervisor(s). Firstly, it is important to recognise that most students hold their supervisor in extreme high regard and for some, this can automatically mean that they are fearful of challenging their supervisor's opinion or presenting an alternative argument, as suggested in the case of participant 4. Supervisors should be aware of this. It also emphasises the importance of supervisors being able to deliver effective and constructive feedback in a way which supports the student but also makes it clear when improvement is needed. These two factors create a sensitive power balance within the student supervisor relationship which can easily fluctuate. It could also lead to instances where students feel bullied or unable to express their viewpoint as was the case for participant 1, 2 and 4.

Schulze (2012), refers to the work of French and Raven (1959) who describe six different power bases which can exist in student supervisor partnerships. They range from positional power which relates to the position of a supervisor at a university through to coercive power which relates to the power that a supervisor may have over their student in terms of reward and repercussion. At the same time, it is important to note that students also need to establish their own power, to lead their research and contribute towards their own supervision (Schulze, 2012). Being able to understand how these complex power dynamics fluctuate, an ability to deliver feedback effectively, being self-aware, understanding how colleagues perceive you and having an appreciation of how individuals within teams learn and work is a challenge not only for supervisors but for all line managers in the work-place. There is a fine balance of power within student supervisor relationships and it is important for both students and supervisors to be aware and mindful of this. These results highlight the importance of raising awareness of such issues as part of university supervisor support and development programmes and in the professional skills training opportunities for students.

Developing a sense of community

It is clear from the coaching conversations in this study that supervisors and more broadly the university where the study took place, need to develop ways in which to strengthen the research student community. Dealing with feelings of isolation were highlighted by 3 out of 5 participants. For example, participant 1 stated that the university was like a "glass-house" and a "wall," participant 4 remarked that the university can be "anti-social" with limited opportunity to interact with students and colleagues outside of the home academic department. Further, participant 4 suggested that the postgraduate community should have more visibility within the university itself. Finally, participant 5 reported that the university can be a "lonely place" and that there is a lack of community. These examples are important because they show that participants of this study want to interact with their peers and learn about research taking place elsewhere.

Developing a sense of community should be a consideration for the university because providing more opportunity for students to meet will not only help combat feelings of isolation but will also provide a gateway for peers to share their experiences, support each other and develop personal networks. It will enable interdisciplinary discussions to take place and hopefully facilitate collaboration which is extremely important for universities and the higher education sector. Providing doctoral students with a chance to showcase their research and celebrate achievements will also raise the visibility of doctoral students. Supervisors should be encouraged to support these interactions.

It is also important to note that the sector also recognises the importance of community development as part of the research degree experience. Universities are expected to provide opportunity for students to engage with communities of researchers as part of their compliance with the UK Quality Code (Quality Assurance Agency, Chapter B11: Research Degrees).

Life beyond the PhD

Coaching provided participants with time and space to think about themselves. It also provided a “safe” and “non-judgemental” environment in which to discuss matters relating to wellbeing and mental health. In one particular case, participant 1 reported that coaching helped her to cope with panic attacks and improve her “overall state of mind and confidence.” Participant 5 reported that coaching helped her to feel like there is “hope for the future and that “life beyond the PhD looks positive.”

Ensuring good wellbeing and a healthy work-life balance are becoming an increasing priority for UK higher education institutions especially given the Office for National Statistics recently reported an increase in the rate of suicide in the UK. Mental health and wellbeing issues in academia are no exception and the number of cases being reported are increasing (Davies, 2015). The fact that participants of this study reported issues to do with mental health is therefore not a surprise. What is surprising is that none of the participants referenced other support services which are available to them at this university, but perhaps they were unaware of services they could access. Either way, if coaching helped participants to address these sorts of issues, as participants of this study confirmed, then coaching programmes should be supported. It is also clear from these findings that issues relating to stress and participant wellbeing are prominent in the participants and it would therefore be worthwhile exploring whether these challenges are more widespread within the population of doctoral students at this university. Having a better understanding of factors which contribute towards poor mental health could then be used to strengthen supervisors’ awareness and enhance student support.

The final issue cited by participant 5 was career development. Discussing career development with a coach could be considered unusual because many students often discuss careers with their supervisors, especially if they are considering a career in academia. However, it is possible that participant 5 did not wish to discuss career development with her supervisor because her career choices were not related to academia. This was not explored further.

Final remarks of the discussion

The participant interviews and results of the end of programme questionnaires highlight some of the main challenges affecting participants at this university. These are developing professional skills, overcoming challenges with the student supervisor partnership, developing a sense of community and life beyond the PhD. The results also show that participants perceived coaching to have a positive impact on these issues by enabling identification of practical solutions and actions to address difficult situations. Participants also reported that coaching built confidence, developed assertiveness, enhanced self-awareness and personal effectiveness. Some participants also reported that coaching contributed to improved wellbeing. The results of this study also raise important questions for the university to consider in terms of enhancing the doctoral student experience and the final section of this paper sets out recommendations and concluding remarks.

Recommendations

1. This study highlights that coaching has been a helpful means of support for doctoral students facing challenges at this University. Therefore, it is recommended that the University continues to support the doctoral student coaching programme.
2. Some of the issues facing participants of this study may be more widespread within the University or they may not. If they are more widespread then it would be helpful for the University to know this. Support for doctoral students can then be reviewed and adjusted, to ensure it remains fit for purpose. Therefore, it is recommended that the University explores whether the issues raised by participants in this study are more widespread.
3. Participants reported that coaching assisted with the development of professional skills. It is important to ensure participants can progress their research and that they have the skills and attributes which are of most value to employers. Therefore, it is recommended that the University continues to provide doctoral students with the opportunity to develop these. It is also suggested that careful consideration is given to what attributes employers require graduates to demonstrate so that these can be aligned with professional skills development programmes.
4. Many of the issues presented by participants related to the student supervisor partnership. The study highlights the need for mutually agreed expectations from the start and the development of training to support effective partnership management. Therefore, the fourth recommendation is for the University to review the support and mechanisms for developing effective student supervisor partnerships.
5. Should the University choose to carry out recommendation two and explore whether the issues and challenges facing participants of this study are more widespread within the population of doctoral students, the results can be used to inform the support and development programmes for supervisors. Supervisors should be made more aware of the challenges and issues affecting doctoral students at this institution and specific development programmes and information on how best to support doctoral students facing particular issues could be made available. Therefore, it is recommended that the university uses the results of recommendation two, to inform the support and development programmes for doctoral supervisors.
6. This study also highlights that participants feel stressed and are concerned with their wellbeing. Therefore it is recommended that the University reviews how it promotes its support services to doctoral students.
7. Finally, this study indicates that participants of this study would welcome improved community development. It is therefore recommended that the University considers ways in which to strengthen the doctoral student community and improve visibility for doctoral students.

Concluding remarks

This study explores the impact of coaching doctoral students at a university in London. All participants reported positively on their experience of coaching, highlighting that it enabled action, developed confidence and improved personal effectiveness. Some participants reported that coaching improved their wellbeing. This study also makes recommendations to the University where the study took place some of which are already being taken forward. Importantly, it highlights that effective opportunities are needed to support the student supervisor partnership. Although the sample is small, this study provides the sector with a helpful indication of some of the challenges facing doctoral students and makes the case to support coaching programmes for students.

In the future, it is suggested that further research is carried out on a larger sample of doctoral students and perhaps includes comparative studies which explore, for example, the impact of coaching on doctoral students from different countries, disciplines and socio-economic backgrounds. It may be possible to carry out a study which uses a larger sample to explore whether coaching has a more direct impact on the doctoral student experience and research progress, benchmarking control and experimental groups with the findings of the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and the university's submission rates.

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