

# One-to-one coaching as a catalyst for personal development: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of coaching undergraduates at a UK university

Natalie Lancer & Virginia Eatough

---

**Objectives:** *This paper examines the experience of nine undergraduates who had six coaching sessions over an academic year. It is part of a wider study which explores how young people experience and understand personal growth in the context of university life.*

**Design:** *A qualitative, longitudinal design was employed and semi-structured interviews were used. The transcribed interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an experiential approach which focuses on how individuals make sense of a particular experience in a specific context.*

**Methods:** *A volunteer sample of nine students, across various Arts and Social Science subjects, was recruited in a Russell Group university and each student received six one-to-one professional coaching sessions in person and/or by Skype.*

**Findings:** *The students felt that the coaching sessions sped up the growth that would have happened eventually, and thus they could put into practice what they had learned much earlier than they could otherwise have done. Coaching benefitted the students in four broad ways: it gave them an increased sense of control over their work and other areas; it helped them achieve greater balance and focus; it increased their confidence; and enabled them to take new perspectives on various issues.*

**Conclusions:** *Coaching helped the undergraduates address common concerns such as time management, stress, social relationships and confidence. Universities could enhance the student experience if they helped students address these concerns, perhaps by training personal tutors to take a coaching approach or by giving students access to professional coaches as a widening or pre-emptive component of their psychological services provision.*

**Keywords:** *Coaching; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; positive psychology; personal development; emerging adulthood; higher education.*

THE BENEFITS of both one-to-one and group coaching for students have been demonstrated in numerous studies. However, most of these have used quantitative designs and measures such as the General Health Questionnaire (Short et al., 2010). These studies are useful as they make clear how coaching affects students in particular domains. For example, in an early study, Grant (2003) found that group coaching for postgraduate mature students was associated with significantly higher levels of goal attainment, along with improvements in metacognitive processing (self-reflection and

insight) and mental health (lower depression, stress, and anxiety). Sue-Chan and Latham (2004) compared grades attained and satisfaction for MBA students coached by an external coach with those coached by peers and found that both measures were greater when coached by external coaches. Thus it seems there are specific benefits for using external or professional coaches.

Coaching studies on undergraduate students have tended to focus on deprived or 'special case' populations. For example, Greene (2004) found that one-to-one coaching helped economically and socially disad-

vantaged undergraduates gain confidence and reduce anxiety. Swartz et al. (2005) found that coaching helped undergraduates with ADHD organise themselves and make positive changes and Van Zandvoort et al. (2009) found that obese female university students attributed their adoption of healthier lifestyles and enhanced self-acceptance to coaching. Robinson and Gahagan (2010) found that coaching resulted in 40 per cent fewer suspended students from a group of academically underperforming students.

There have been a limited number of coaching studies on non 'special case' and non-clinical students, which is surprising given that coaching aims to help all types of non-clinical people attain goals and achieve enhancement of their life experience in personal and/or professional spheres (Grant, 2003). The few studies undertaken include Franklin and Doran's (2009) work which found that two different coaching programmes increased academic performance; Short et al. (2010) found that peer coaching significantly reduced the psychological distress of a group of psychology undergraduate students, compared to a control group whilst Fried and Irwin (2016) found that stress management and academic performance improved as a result of coaching sessions compared to a control group.

We suggest that the breadth and depth of the existing literature is limited both due to the nature of the measures used (such as academic performance) in the quantitative studies and due to the small number of qualitative studies undertaken. These studies give an overview of coaching but due to their design cannot explain how coaching is experienced and what it is 'like'.

There are, however, plenty of qualitative studies which focus on the experience of education (unrelated to coaching) and coaching in contexts other than education. For example, the focus of specific studies using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) include the personal growth of mature university students (Stevens, 2003) and the experiences of coaching in a business setting (Gyllensten et

al., 2010). However, there is a dearth of studies that use qualitative approaches to explore coaching in university settings. We posit that IPA's focus on the experience of the participants' world, as lived through their eyes, is important when considering how coaching affects students as it provides insight into their perspective as told through their words. IPA's method of elucidating shared themes is helpful when considering how the group as a whole benefited from coaching. This analysis can be used to tentatively consider how other similar groups of people in a similar context may benefit from coaching.

Arnett (2000) identifies the ages from 18 to 22, the age range of all the undergraduates in this current study, as a distinct life stage of 'emerging adulthood' complete with its own dilemmas to explore. Thus we argue that the reasons to offer coaching to undergraduates are compelling, not only might it affect academic scores and confidence, but most undergraduates are making the transition into emerging adulthood replete with its own distinct issues.

The fact that students are at time in their lives where support could be beneficial is not the only reason why universities might offer coaching to their undergraduates. In an age of market forces within the university context, students are 'consumers' (Naidoo et al., 2011) and universities are having to work hard to attract the best. Jackson (2003) estimates that one in four students in the UK drops out. In a separate study, Yorke and Longden (2004) found that students' experience of the course and institution was one of four main reasons for student withdrawal. This, coupled with the fact that tuition fees are increasing in the UK, means that universities are going to have to work hard to make sure all students have a positive experience to both attract and retain them. There is evidence to suggest that coaching can increase student retention. A US Government study found that undergraduates who received individual coaching for two semesters were significantly more likely to remain at college, up to 18 months after the intervention, com-

pared to those who had not received coaching (US Department of Education, 2012). Furthermore, positive student perceptions of their learning environment had a stronger positive correlation with academic outcomes than previous school achievement (Lizzio et al., 2002). Therefore, universities keen to maximise university students' academic outcomes would be wise to consider how to increase these positive student perceptions.

The growing number of student users accessing counselling services (Turner et al., 2007) may reflect a gap in student support systems. Coaching in the university context may therefore 'nip in the bud' issues which could otherwise develop into problems requiring counselling services and can thus be viewed as a preventative tool that addresses student health and wellbeing.

The current research is the first study from a series exploring the personal growth of undergraduates who volunteered to participate in one-to-one coaching sessions over one year. The second study explores the experience of undergraduates who had two years of coaching.

## Methods

### Design

A qualitative, longitudinal design was employed and data was gathered using semi-structured interviews at four time points over 12 months. The transcribed interviews were analysed using IPA, looking first idiosyncratically, case-by-case and then moving across the data set to make comparisons in what is shared and what is variable. IPA is an interpretative, experiential approach which focuses on how individuals make sense of a particular experience in a specific context. Analysis is a co-construction of knowledge between participant and researcher.

### Recruitment strategy and participants

Nine full-time undergraduates responded to a call to participate which was made in two ways, via the first author's presentation about the study at the beginning of an undergraduate lecture and via an email sent by the

subject administrator. Six of the participants were female and three were male; seven were first year students and two were second year students. The students were highly articulate and academically able. See Table 1 for further participant details.

### Procedure

Nine students from a Russell Group university, across various Arts and Social Science subjects, were recruited to receive six one-to-one professional coaching sessions in person and/or by Skype at the beginning of the 2014/2015 academic year. Ten coaches volunteered to give *pro bono* coaching in response to our notice posted on the European Mentoring and Coaching Council website and through the first author's professional network. The coaches could use whatever coaching approach they preferred. In coaching generally, many coaches use the 'systemic eclectic' approach (i.e. they develop their own philosophy and techniques as their knowledge and experience develops) to fit the context and the client (Lancer, Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2016).

After the researchers led a group briefing with coaches and students, each student was given an information sheet and signed a consent form. The first author paired the students with the coaches randomly. Each student had three one-hour coaching sessions between October and December 2014 and a further three one-hour coaching sessions between January and March 2015 in which they were free to discuss whatever issues they wanted. They were also free to change coaches if the pairings did not 'work', or if there was some other issue. The coaches attended a debrief led by the first author in March 2015.

Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect anonymity (see Table 1). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at Birkbeck, University of London and adhered to BPS ethical guidelines.

IPA requires the participants to have a degree of homogeneity in order for the essence of an experience to be distilled (Smith et al., 2009). Students were recruited

**Table 1: Table of participant descriptors**

| Pseudonym | Year at university | Subject    | Age | Gender |
|-----------|--------------------|------------|-----|--------|
| Zara      | 1st                | Humanities | 19  | Female |
| Claire    | 1st                | Humanities | 20  | Female |
| Natasha   | 1st                | Humanities | 20  | Female |
| Lynn      | 1st                | Arts       | 19  | Female |
| Holly     | 1st                | Arts       | 19  | Female |
| Martin    | 2nd                | Arts       | 20  | Male   |
| Colin     | 2nd                | Humanities | 25  | Male   |
| Hermione  | 2nd                | Arts       | 21  | Female |
| Neil      | 1st                | Humanities | 19  | Male   |

from the same university and studying similar subjects. Additional homogeneity arose from the fact that they all had an interest in personal development and were invested in their coaching sessions as manifested both in terms of attending them all and also being keen to discuss them in their interviews.

***Data collection***

Each student was interviewed, using one-to-one, semi-structured, open-ended interviews by the first author at four time points: before their first coaching session, after their third, after their sixth and six months after their last coaching session in a comfortable university office. Thus although the data reflects the participants’ retrospective sense-making of their coaching experience, for the middle two interviews, the participants’ accounts were close in time to the coaching sessions they were describing. Using semi-structured interviews enabled rich data to be collected as although there was an interview schedule, it was used flexibly and we were open to the students speaking about what was important to them within the broad subject matter (Smith et al., 2009). The interview questions were designed to elicit concrete details of the lived experience of coaching and to enable the participants to reflect on

how coaching had affected them. The questions were similar at each time point and are listed below:

- Tell me about the coaching sessions in as much detail as possible.
- What does being coached feel like? What happens in a session or between sessions?
- Would you have learnt what you have learnt on your own eventually or has the coaching added something new?
- What were your expectations of the sessions? Are they what you expected?
- What general themes/topics have you covered?
- Last time, you described a typical day at university. Has the experience of coaching affected how you approach your day or made you think about your day differently?
- How do you think coaching is affecting you, if at all? What about in terms of: contributing to your developing personal growth, life plans, relationships, ambitions, confidence, outlook, academic performance, motivation, and sense of self?
- Overall how would you describe the coaching experience?
- When was the coaching conversation most and least productive?
- What do you think you have achieved through the coaching sessions?

- Do you think you would have achieved those things without the sessions?
- Would you have coaching again? If yes, why? If no, are you pleased you signed up to have coaching? Why wouldn't you have further coaching?
- Would you recommend coaching to your university friends?
- What will take the place of the coaching relationship for you?
- What do you think the future holds for you? Have your coaching sessions influenced your thinking on this?
- Did you think about your coaching sessions at all over the summer?
- Do you think you are still feeling the effects of the coaching sessions from last year?

The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed.

### *Analysis*

The four interview scripts for each participant were considered as a joined-up longitudinal account. They were analysed using IPA. This involves capturing the detailed lived experience of participants on an idiographic level and then looking for patterning across cases. The first author immersed herself in the data, reading all four transcripts for one participant in one sitting whilst listening to the audio recording. Each transcript was then re-read and annotated line by line with key words, phrases, themes and ideas. The data was then transferred to a spreadsheet and each answer or question was allocated a cell. Thus, when quoting below we give cell numbers. Each interview was put on a different tab of the same document and each participant was allocated a new spreadsheet. Descriptive comments were noted in the cell to the right of the transcript, key phrases were highlighted in red and linguistic observations that gave insight into the participant's experience were noted (Smith et al., 2009). Emergent themes were noted to the left which were at a higher conceptual and psychological level than the descriptive themes. All the emergent themes were copied and pasted into one document, duplicates were removed

and themes were grouped into clusters. Some of the themes were used as labels for emergent themes, or a new label was found to capture the ideas of several emergent themes. Careful consideration was given to the superordinate themes. A table of superordinate themes and emergent themes was created, complete with an example quotation for each one and finally, the table was turned into a thematic diagrammatic structure. This was repeated for each participant. Each diagrammatic structure was then compared for each participant and similarities and differences were analysed, resulting in an overall thematic structure for the experience of coaching as an undergraduate for the whole group (see Table 2).

The first author was consciously reflexive about her experience as a student, university adviser and professional coach and was open to what the data said on its own terms (Smith et al., 2009). The second author acted as an independent verifier and both authors reflectively discussed the emergent and superordinate themes until consensus was reached. The findings were evaluated using Yardley's (2000) criteria for qualitative methodologies. Firstly, the analysts were sensitive to context by immersing themselves in the relevant philosophical, empirical and methodological literature. Secondly, they were sensitive to the data itself as analytical claims were grounded in the data with extracts used as evidence to aid transparency, allowing the reader to assess our interpretations. The effect of the researchers' characteristics on the participants both in interview and in terms of what was subjectively brought to the analysis was reflexively considered. Both analysts are committed researchers and interact with university students in their jobs, and, coupled with the fact that the first author is a professional coach, this meant that rapport could be established quickly and pertinent supplementary questions could be asked, giving rise to high quality data elicited at interview. The second author is an IPA expert and was a sounding board for the first author to check her analyses were rigorous. A mark of quality of analysis is that the reader gains an understanding of the phenomenon at hand and an appreciation of what it must be

Table 2: Superordinate and emergent themes

| 'It was a catalyst for development': Coaching as catalyst   |  |
|---|--|
| Superordinate theme one:<br>'It's like more of like a conversation with a friend' – reflections on the experience of coaching | Superordinate theme two:<br>'I'm 100 per cent sure I would not have done things that I've done this past six months without the coaching': coaching 'wins' |
| Emergent themes   | Emergent themes  |
| Coaching accelerating development   | Control: Making tasks and problems more manageable   |
| The nature of the coaching relationship   | Balance and focus  |
| Coaching compared with other support mechanisms   | Confidence: self-belief, assertiveness and reassurance   |
| Perceptions of which types of people would benefit from coaching and at what times in their lives                             | New perspectives   |

like to experience that phenomenon. Finally, the research should bring a new understanding to the topic and this study has added to the literature by focusing on a first-person perspective illuminating what the experience of coaching is like in a university context. Furthermore, if the findings resonate with the reader then this is an indication of the quality of research (Finlay, 2011).

**Findings**

The coaching experience was broadly similar for eight of the nine students. One student, Zara, had a very different experience which acted as a counterpoint, serving as a contrast to emphasise the salient features of the other participants' accounts. Therefore, although she appears less often in the following extracts, her data has an important role to play analytically. The phrase that captures the whole shared experience is *'It was a catalyst for development': Coaching as catalyst*. This experience was made up of two superordinate themes: *'It's like more of like a conversation with a friend' – reflections on the experience of coaching* and *'I'm 100 per cent sure I would not have done things that I've done this past six months without the coaching' – coaching 'wins'*.

The first superordinate theme is about the students' thoughts on the coaching experience including their relationship with their coach and for whom they felt coaching would be useful in future. This provides the context for the second superordinate theme which includes the content of the sessions and how this content was put to use in the students' lives. It was found that coaching helped the students gain control of their lives, achieve greater balance and focus, increase their confidence and see situations from new perspectives.

***Superordinate theme one: 'It's like more of like a conversation with a friend': Reflections on the experience of coaching***

This superordinate theme comprises the almost unanimous characterisation by the participants of coaching accelerating development. It also includes the nature of the coaching relationship, coaching compared with other support mechanisms, perceptions of which types of people would benefit from coaching and at what times in their lives.

***Coaching accelerating development***

There was a great deal of convergence in the idea that coaching sped up the participants'

development like a ‘catalyst’. This word was used spontaneously by one student and the sentiment was echoed by the others:

*I would say that it [coaching] was very helpful in that it was a catalyst for development.* Holly, 3D88

The word ‘catalyst’ is inextricably linked with temporality – that is, it makes a change or a realisation happen faster than it would have done otherwise. The language the students used to describe their coaching experience was very positive. As well as the word ‘helpful’ above, other words included ‘enjoyable’, ‘active’ and ‘engaging’. Claire exemplifies this position:

*I think without coaching you will take longer time to be confident. Coaching just shortened that time period.* Claire, 4D299

Neil explains that it would have taken longer for him to feel psychologically secure at university if he had not had coaching sessions, and he would have got worse grades:

*Yeah, I still think that without the first one [session] and the others, I suppose, I would have still been insecure about being at [at this university] or it would have taken me longer to get over and I might have got worse grades.* Neil, 4D102

Several students allude to the fact that coaching decreased the amount of time it would have taken for them to reach the same level of academic performance. Colin wished he could have been as motivated and organised in his first year, when he did not have coaching:

*Even though the workload was easier and stuff like that, I think if I had been able to approach my work like I did this year, last year, it means I could have come into this year and started straight away. I could have got better results in my first coursework.* Colin, 3D179

As well as speeding up growth, coaching added new ideas into the mix. The time man-

agement techniques that Colin’s coach introduced were new to him:

*It sounds so simple now that I’m thinking about it but at the time it was like a revelation. It really was.* Colin, 3D141

The word ‘revelation’ emphasises the fact that a new way of doing things was revealed to him. He felt that this new way directly improved his academic performance. Martin and Natasha both commented how coaching had stimulated their thinking and that new personal ground had been broken:

*It’s quite challenging but then it’s quite interesting as well because it’s making me think of things which I wouldn’t think of by myself.* Martin, 2D168

*It’s actually new stuff that I’ve, I’ve never thought about doing.* Natasha, 2D192

So we can see that some students believed that coaching accelerated their development and others felt it had introduced new elements of development.

#### *The nature of the coaching relationship*

The nature of the coaching relationship influenced how the students responded to the coaching and the benefit they derived from the sessions.

Neil felt that because the coach was a professional (a professional listener and motivator, in a sense) he could open up about himself more:

*Yes I feel like, you know, because he’s outside but it’s like when you go to a doctor about a physical problem you know they see it all the time, you know I mean I presume, like I mean yes I’m probably younger than a lot of the people that he sees professionally but, no, I just think I’m sure he can deal with this.* Neil, 2D231

Holly found she had an informal, friendly relationship with her coach:

*I found it to be a lot more informal and a lot more casual than I expected in a very good way. Holly, 3D88*

Claire valued the fact that she did not have any ties to the coach so she could really speak freely:

*I think I can feel release because I can talk with someone, yes. I don't know her, she doesn't know me. That we can discuss on one part of my life just only this part and yes. Claire, 2D216*

Many students experienced these feelings of 'relief' and 'release' in the process of unburdening themselves in the coaching sessions. Many students were surprised at how the coach was totally focused on them. Neil was touched by how deeply his coach was listening to him:

*Yes within the first, within the first one because it was at the point where he, where he suddenly, he would say something and it showed that he's listened so much you know like a really sort of in-depth comment so at that point you think you know he's not just, he's not just looking at his watch. Neil, 2D179*

For many students, opening up to their coach was a new experience. Hermione found the opening up that she was able to do, refreshing:

*Yes I am actually yes, they go pretty quickly and I guess I'm just not that used to talking about my feelings, not used to discussing that sort of thing so it's very refreshing to be able to open up and analyse things like that yes. Hermione, 2D66*

The word 'refreshing' alludes to reinvigorating the self and a restoring of energy. Many students felt that the sessions gave them a boost of energy. Other students also characterised coaching as a boost of motivation:

*It's kind of like a little cheerleader in a way, I think. So, having that as advice and then motivation... it's hard to explain. Lynn, 3D128*

The coach was a 'cheerleader' encouraging Lynn and motivating her.

The very act of having to report back in the next coaching session was inherently motivating:

*I think I had the potential to get there but I almost needed the external push, knowing that I would then have someone to tell that to, to relate that back, its more motivation to actually do it. Hermione, 2D116*

The students developed a relationship with the coach such that they did not want to fall short of their expectations:

*I think, I wouldn't like to, I wouldn't like to disappoint him, not that he'll be that bothered but, yes disappoint him in a very vague sense I mean I'm hardly that much of a part of his life. Neil, 2D209*

Zara was also motivated by coaching but found that the effect dissipated:

*Maybe it had short-term impacts like straight after you'd be like, 'Oh I should do this or get going with this.' Then it kind of fades after a bit until your next session. Zara 4D78*

Zara's image of the motivation fading contrasts with Natasha's belief that the coaching's impact would last forever:

*I, I don't think I will freak out because like the stuff I will carry with me for like the rest of my life, like these little tips. Natasha 2D166*

Thus it can be seen the students' perceived that coaching, in terms of having someone non-partisan with whom to discuss issues, enabled the students to open up and unburden themselves, which gave them the feeling of release and relief. Furthermore, having to report back to their coach in the following session gave the students an extra source of motivation to work on their goals.

*Coaching compared with other support mechanisms*

Many students made comparisons between



coaching and other forms of support including therapy and friendships. Several students expressed the view that the coaching relationship could be achieved within friendships:

*Mike was a lot like a friend in the way that he listened and was compassionate but yeah I think you can get that from actual unpaid friendships as well so that... Neil, 3D317*

However, Holly expressed the view that she was pleased that she was able to talk about friends to someone who was not her friend, precluding the need to 'bitch' about them:

*It's not the same as counselling but it was very cathartic to be able to talk about things that I didn't feel I had anybody else to talk to about them, so specifically I could always talk about friends that I didn't want, that I didn't want to have to bitch about a friend to somebody else, so that sort of thing was good. Holly, 3D88*

She compares coaching to counselling and draws out the cathartic nature of the sessions as a similarity. Martin draws a similar parallel:

*One of my friends is seeing a therapist now which isn't exactly the same but it's essentially the same sort of thing where you're talking. Martin, 3D161-162*

However, Natasha found the power relations within coaching to be quite different to those found in counselling. She found that coaching gave rise to a more equal relationship between professional and client, in contrast to her previous experience of therapy where she felt the therapist was writing notes about her, as if she were an object who was having therapy done to her, rather than with her:

*So different, I've, I don't feel like someone is domineering the conversation. It's like 'and how does this make you feel?' I hate questions like that, it's just. If if I don't say how it makes me feel, I don't want to talk about how it makes me feel. It's completely different and people think therapy is like coaching, completely*

*wrong. It's like more of like a conversation with a friend, just having like a one on one conversation. It doesn't feel like someone's writing notes about you like, oh this is your reaction to this equals something. Natasha, 2D400*

Thus in the participants' eyes, the experience of coaching shared commonalities and differences to therapy and friendships.

*Perceptions of which types of people would benefit from coaching and at what times in their lives*

The students discussed whom coaching could benefit and when would be a good time in life to have coaching. Over half felt coaching would be useful for people who lacked confidence:

*I think generally people who are less confident or who have less insight into their own lives would be the kind of people who would benefit. Lynn, 3D136*

Confidence is a concept that permeated the interviews and is clearly something the students felt was very important to cultivate. It seems to hold the key to what was achieved through coaching and what was missing in a lot of students' lives.

The one student who did not benefit from coaching, Zara, attributed this to her inability to open up to a stranger, even though she wanted to talk about relationship issues:

*Yeah. I think maybe I'm just not comfortable talking about more personal stuff with people I don't know that well. Zara, 3D52*

Zara, did in fact, change coaches after two sessions, but she felt unable to disclose her issues to either of them. This suggests that it was not the coaches' skills that prevented her from opening up, but, as she herself identified, it is that she is not comfortable doing so which has important implications for whom coaching is offered in the future. In fact, Holly highlighted the ability to open up to be important for the success of coaching:

*I think it does take a certain openness of mind to do it. Holly, 3D208*

When considering the best time to have coaching, many students explained that due to the strangeness of university when they first arrived, the first year of university would be the most beneficial year which has direct implications for university policy:

*I think first year is a good time because it's kind of chaotic and a time for adjustment. I think in uni years, the first one is probably the best one and then probably the next best time would be like midlife crisis. Lynn, 3D130*

Indeed, half the students felt that any dramatic life transition would be a good time to have coaching:

*I can't really think on the top of my head of something more appropriate than, a significant transition like university or trying to find a job after university or, or maybe even somebody who's about to go into retirement as well, just when your complete lifestyle is going through a change or moving, you know when you do something big like a new town or move to a new country even, I think would be very useful. Holly, 3D232*

Thus the students felt that people who lacked confidence, but who had the ability to open up, would benefit the most from coaching, and that coaching would be most useful in the first year of university, and also at other transitional times in life.

This superordinate theme has encompassed the experience of coaching as a catalyst for development; the experience of the coaching relationship; the idea that coaching shared common features with other forms of support and that coaching would most benefit first year university students who lacked confidence and who could open up.

***Superordinate theme two: 'I'm 100 per cent sure I would not have done things that***

***I've done this past six months without the coaching' – coaching 'wins'***

This superordinate theme describes the four broad ways in which coaching benefited the students. Firstly, coaching gave the students a sense of control by imparting specific strategies to address tasks and problems. Secondly, coaching helped them achieve greater balance and focus in the different aspects of their lives. Thirdly, coaching sessions increased the students' confidence which led to them feeling more motivated. Finally, it helped the students see situations from new perspectives which empowered them to change behaviours, benefitting the students in different ways such as enjoying improved relationships.

***Control: Making tasks and problems more manageable***

Much of what was addressed and achieved through the coaching sessions for all participants was gaining a sense of control over their work and how to make tasks and problems more manageable. This, in turn, led to the avoidance of anxiety and, ultimately, a perceived improvement in academic work. Many students spoke of 'stress' and 'panic attacks' and welcomed methods to reduce these.

Control was partly achieved by introducing time management techniques, including breaking down tasks into smaller components and also simply realising that there is enough time in the day to do what is needed. Colin serves as an exemplar:

*Just setting small goals basically, setting small goals to do certain stuff by a certain date and just, generally just managing my time better, it's really just about setting small goals and then hitting them like doing the research for a paper and then like noting it out so doing a plan and then going on and actually finishing it and then handing in a first draft and getting it back and you know that sort of stuff helps immensely, immensely. Colin, 2D40*

The practical strategy of breaking issues down led to the students feeling less stressed about their work or aspects of their life:

*I think with outlook as well I'm more, because I can be quite a stressed person, quite an anxious person but I feel more relaxed than I was because I think I know how to address the problems if, Henry's taught me sort of how to break down issues in my life and aspects of my life to address them so it's made my outlook on life a lot more relaxed because I don't find it too hard to handle certain things. Hermione, 3D156*

Hermione became more relaxed as she had learnt how to handle issues that previously would have made her stressed. Natasha's coach worked with her to change her perception of how much time there is in the day, obviating the need to panic about not having enough time:

*Well it's just got me better at studying, I'm now not leaving everything till the last minute I'm taking more time, I'm like realising that I have a lot of time in the day so I can get quite a lot done and I previously thought that I couldn't so I'm better at studying and I can do the readings now, I can understand stuff better in lectures and seminars. Natasha, 3D124*

Thus, adopting time-management techniques helped her space out her work more and to decrease procrastination. Time seemed more stretched out for Natasha as she gained greater control over her work.

Both Natasha and Hermione talked about suffering from panic attacks and insomnia respectively:

*It's similar to a panic attack except all these bad scenarios keep going around in your head and you're just like, 'This is going to be the worst thing ever. When I have to go up and talk I'm going to fall, I'm going to forget my words. Everyone is going to laugh.' It's just not fun. One of the tips she gave me was to try and make myself laugh. It's weird because you look insane when you're doing it but that really does help. Natasha, 4D34*

*Things like breathing exercises. He had a whole list. I just remember a hot drink, a bath and*

*reading. Even though that's so simple, for some reason I just always remember that conversation and the list of things to help sleep. Hermione, 4D128.*

The students were given motivational tips which could be applied throughout their lives. Natasha kept coming back to a phrase that had been introduced in her coaching session 'you can have everything, just not right now' which became like a motivational mantra for her:

*Like this, this one phrase she said to me, it's like 'you can have everything, just not right now' which is, like that's quite important to me now because when I first started uni, okay I need to get this, this and this done. I need to do all these things, not important in my first year but I need to do them. I need to have everything down and I don't actually, like some things can wait until second year. Natasha, 2D168*

Natasha realised that although initially she wanted to be on top of everything straight away, there was no rush. She became empowered to engage in her life and take one step at a time through coaching which relieved the pressure she put on herself.

Claire learnt how to face problems through coaching:

*At first if someone tells you what you can do to deal with one problem, then gradually you will know how to deal with the problem yourself. It's important they teach you the skills to deal with problems. That's more important for me. Claire, 4D117.*

She was able to put these problem-solving skills into practice on her own outside the coaching sessions.

#### *Balance and focus*

Coaching also helped the students to focus on what was important to them which, in turn, gave rise to a sense of balance. Martin achieved balance between academic work and other pursuits:

*There's a better balance between doing work and... I've always felt really guilty when I'm not doing work, so I've always been doing work 24/7 but I feel like it's helped me balance that a bit better. So, now when I'm watching TV or something I'm not thinking, 'Oh my God! Maybe I should be...'* Martin, 3D110

The coaching sessions helped the students achieve focus and direction. Lynn spoke implicitly about feeling focussed:

*And like, it is sort of like, being able to sort of reorganise clutter in your head, I think, when you're able to talk about stuff in real life.* Lynn, 2D184

One interpretation of this is that she was taking stock of herself. The fact she was 'reorganising' the clutter means it was once organised, but now she needs to re-evaluate it and re-order it in light of her new way of being. The word 'clutter' evokes things taking up unnecessary space and things being higgledy-piggledy. Thus, for Lynn, focus was about taking stock and creating order in her life.

Colin's manifestation of focus was in terms of planning his work and knowing how to proceed:

*I just remember being very focused after our sessions and knowing what to do. It was nice it helped me to plan, definitely.* Colin, 4D94

Focussing for Colin and others was about zoning in on what next steps to take, that is, forward planning.

Coaching helped Natasha keep herself together and stay on an even keel. She felt she would have been a 'wreck' without coaching:

*'Yes I'm, I'm really happy because it's helped me quite a lot. It's I think, I don't feel that... if I didn't do the coaching I'd be a bit, not worse off but not doing as well as I am now. Especially with certain areas like the procrastination. I'd be, I'd be a wreck actually.'* Natasha, 2D160

The word 'wreck' conjures up images that Natasha would have had no compass, no anchor and would have lost her way in her first year. Coaching enabled her to feel whole, to navigate university and to survive any turbulent waters.

*Confidence: self-belief, assertiveness and reassurance*

The greatest area of convergence for many students was that coaching gave them confidence. This included a growing confidence in their studies and how university 'works' as well as the growing of an internal confidence, that is, self-belief. Holly serves as an exemplar:

*I think I've definitely become, become a lot more confident through the process and a lot more able to talk about problems that maybe I was too shy or I didn't think were important enough to talk about.* Holly, 3D170

She grew in her convictions about what was important to talk about, in other words her self-belief grew. Other students' confidence also manifested as an increase in self-belief:

*Yeah, just articulating stuff and I think when you do articulate stuff, it gives you confidence and belief in what you're saying. I think it helped in that sense as well.* Lynn, 4D228

Lynn felt that the very act of articulating her ideas and goals out loud increased her self-belief. Hermione's increase in confidence manifested as assertiveness which positively affected her social relationships and her participation in societies:

*H: Things, I'm 100 per cent sure I would not have done things that I've done this past six months, over the past six months without the coaching, I think that definitely....*

*I: Like, like what?*

*H: I've become more assertive, like, applying for this job, I probably wouldn't have done it because it's a lot of one-on-one, like going up to people you don't know, interacting so I wouldn't have applied when I applied in like December/Janu-*

ary. Going to certain societies, going to debate... I think eventually I would have got there but it's definitely sped up the process and yeah, just, just other social things, I think it's improved the way I react/relate to other people and actually say how I feel without worrying so much so yeah, it's, it's, I definitely feel like I achieved more with it. Hermione, 3D74-76

Neil's coach helped increase his confidence by challenging his belief that he should not contribute ideas to tutorials for fear of getting something wrong:

*One of the major things was more confident in lectures and tutorials at actually speaking because I explained how I won't say ideas in a tutorial in case they're wrong, you know and he'd be like 'why would they be wrong?' you know and 'other people get them wrong' and 'who would judge you like that?' you know, so that was a major thing. Neil, 2D151*

Thus Neil attributed his change in his academic interactions to coaching.

The students' perceived confidence also increased by gaining reassurance from their coaches. Martin exemplifies this:

*M: That [making a film] was, that was kind of feeding off of coaching because it was making me feel like, like I could do it, so I could have but.*

*I: And what, do, do you feel like you would have done it anyway? You know like, you needed this external encouragement to get going, is that right or?*

*M: I don't know really because... I've written things before but then I've just like, I just deleted them or given them to my brother because he makes films but I've never really. Because I could have done it last year and I never did. Martin, 2D276-298*

For some, the reassurance of the coach became internalised in the students such that they could hear the coach's voice as they were going about their activities:

*It's just really helpful it's like, it's like you have like a second guessing voice at the back of your head and it helps just like to not reinstate your ideas but like become more like confident in your ideas and that, okay I can do this. It's like a little pep talk now and then which is nice. Natasha, 3D138*

The characterisation of coaching as a 'pep talk' is similar to Lynn's use of the word 'cheerleader' in the previous superordinate theme. Reassurance for Holly was in the form of validation of solutions:

*Well you see, I think for a lot of things, it was less finding a solution and more validating a solution that I had already found but didn't really know if it was the right solution. So a lot of the time, even with social problems I would, we would talk about the problems and I would already have a solution in mind and that would most likely be the solution I ended up decided on. So a lot of the time it was validation. Holly, 3D106*

Thus, in the students' lived experience, the reassurance that coaching offered directly increased their confidence. Confidence, in the form of self-belief, assertiveness and reassurance, was a near-unanimous achievement of coaching.

#### *New perspectives*

The coaching sessions gave the students new insights and perspectives on their worlds and thinking. Both Hermione and Martin had considered university to be a 'stepping stone' – a temporary place to stop and a means to an end. Both students found that they could now enjoy university in its own right:

*My actual uni experience, I'm thinking more as a thing to really enjoy and just get really involved in 'everything uni' and not worry about the future. My view of uni has changed in terms of I see it to enjoy, rather than a stepping stone to a job. Hermione, 4D262*

*Well, that's the way I've always seen it, a stepping-stone but I feel like I can enjoy it. Martin, 3D140*

Just as Hermione and Martin had a shift in attitude about university, so other students experienced a change in outlook which they attributed to coaching:

*The thing that's really stuck with me is that way of thinking. The sheer breadth of not just jumping to a conclusion with a problem. Really considering every single thing you can do to make it easier on yourself or easier on other people, and figure out why you feel the way you do and not just accept that you do feel a certain way. Particularly helpful when figuring out how to come out to my parents and figuring out which way would be easiest for me and which way would be easiest for them. Things like that.*  
Holly, 4D148

Through coaching Holly learnt a new way of thinking and working through problems, which involved discussing the issue for longer and coming up with a several options (or letting go) before jumping to conclusions or premature action/inaction. It can be seen that Holly used what she had learnt from coaching to strategise how to come out to her parents, which is something she had been trying to do for years. Thus coaching had a profound outcome for her.

Zara did derive some benefit from coaching. She discussed losing her phone in one of her coaching sessions, which led to a general discussion about militating against risk. This had two ramifications. Firstly, she backed up her files electronically which was practically useful as she subsequently lost her laptop too. But more importantly, it led her to a change of outlook:

*Just I would say about the whole reacting to things. Like I was thinking of how, you just react to things that happen to you, that maybe we should prepare for them beforehand. That like gave me a different outlook on things.*  
Zara, 2D194

Thus, as a result of coaching, she decided to have systems in place to pre-empt whatever life threw at her.

Another shift in perspective was how students thought and felt about social relationships. For example, Colin, who was a mature student, already had a network of friends and was quite keen not to mix his social life with his university life. However, his coach suggested that making friends at university may enhance his experience:

*She just made me realise how useful it [speaking to people in his class] would be. Like I was saying, that thing about how you need to melt both lives together, it would help it a little bit. She's actually the one who said it would help a little bit and it has. I think it has and I think the more I do it, it will help more.* Colin, 3D109

Thus Colin directly attributed having an improved university experience to coaching.

In this superordinate theme, we have seen a great deal of convergence in how coaching benefited the students. Four emergent themes have been discussed: an increased sense of control, the achievement of greater balance and focus, increased confidence and seeing situations from new perspectives.

## Discussion

The phenomenon of the coaching experience was revealed by the lived experience of the students and comprised several features. Firstly, one feature was that coaching was a positive experience that led to perceived accelerated development. Secondly, the relationship with the coach, in most cases, increased the students' ability to open-up to them and was itself a source of motivation. Thirdly, the phenomenon disclosed how the students felt about coaching in relation to other sources of support such as therapy and friendship. Fourthly, it disclosed who they felt would benefit from coaching, that is, first year university students who lacked confidence and who could open up. Finally, the key feature of the phenomenon of the coaching experience to be revealed by the lived experience of the students was the specific 'wins' or outcomes they attributed to coaching. These covered four main areas: an increased sense of control, the achievement

of greater balance and focus, increased confidence and seeing situations from new perspectives. Confidence permeated the experience of coaching: for example, the students identified that people who wanted to work on confidence would benefit from coaching and it was one of the main areas of achievement attributed to coaching.

These findings confirm Gyllensten and Palmer's (2007) study which found that the coaching relationship was key to reaping the benefits of coaching. Furthermore, this study lends support to Franklin and Doran's (2009) and Fried and Irwin's (2016) findings that coaching positively affected academic performance as several students had the perception that their academic performance had improved as a result of coaching. It would be interesting to explore in a further study, whether their academic performance had, in fact, improved in real terms, or whether their perception of improvement, was a manifestation of their self-reported improved confidence. Either way, universities would do well to incorporate a coaching component to each undergraduate course. This paper also supports Fried and Irwin's (2016) findings that coaching improved stress management as many students reported that coaching had helped them in this regard specifically. Greene's (2004) findings that coaching increased confidence are also borne out by this paper, as students reported feeling increased confidence which they directly attributed to coaching. Greene's research focused on economically and socially disadvantaged undergraduates whereas this current paper does not focus on a 'special case' group. It should be noted that this does not mean that some students in this study were not economically disadvantaged, simply that this was not a criterion for inclusion. Moreover, this paper shows that non-clinical and non 'special case' students reported benefiting from coaching.

Furthermore, this study highlighted the issues with which students need support, namely increasing their sense of control by learning specific techniques, achieving greater

balance and focus, increasing their confidence and taking new perspectives. These issues may well be a key component of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) which is a time of life when many people start university.

This paper has focused on the lived experience and active sense-making of the students which fleshes out the previously reported quantitative studies measuring the positive effects of coaching. Therefore, this paper has added to the literature by providing a fine-grained description of what coaching achieved, from the students' perspective, which can help inform universities how to support their students in specific ways.

### **Implications and conclusions**

The study has shown that one-to-one coaching can have profound effects on students and can also help them to maximise their time at university, as detailed by their first-person accounts. At most universities, careers services, counselling and personal tutoring are discrete entities and suffer from a lack of joined-up thinking. In this study, the coach became a tailored one-stop-shop for the students and helped the students make links between different parts of their life, for example, being low in confidence could affect career choices and relationships. If universities are seeking to improve the student experience, prevent student withdrawal and support their students in general, they would be wise to consider investing in one-to-one coaching for all their students, and not wait until issues become psychological problems. This will also help students to get the most out of their university experience. Universities could provide help in other forms, such as by arranging seminars and workshops on the specific issues detailed in this paper, or by arranging for students to have group-coaching (although the benefits of group coaching in the university context would have to be explored in further research). Furthermore, as an alternative to professional coaches, existing staff members could be trained to take a coaching approach.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study focused on a small group of highly articulate and academically able students at one university and may not be generalisable to other universities or types of student. In addition, this study focused on students studying Arts and Humanities subjects and these results may not be valid for students on more structured, vocational courses such as Medicine or Engineering. However, although the findings of this paper only hold true for this particular group in this context, Smith et al. maintain that 'theoretical generalisability' applies 'where the reader of the report is able to assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge' (Smith et al., 2009:4). In other words, to use Finlay's (2011) idea of 'resonance', if the study invokes professional or common sense resonance, then it would be reasonable to assume that similar findings may well hold true in similar contexts. Furthermore, the small sample was necessary for an in-depth qualitative study, which is highly appropriate for exploring a novel situation or phenomenon.

Importantly, no account was taken of the coaches' different coaching approaches and techniques and no attempt was made to make this uniform. Therefore, it is unclear if some coaching styles were more beneficial than others in this study but since this was an exploratory qualitative study, cause and effect of variables were not sought nor able to be clarified. Moreover, as the coaching sector has burgeoned in recent years, with many different coaching courses on offer, covering a range of approaches, the authors feel it would not be possible to achieve homogeneity in this respect. Since the students presented with different issues, it would also not be possible or wise to use the same techniques on them.

Furthermore, coaches were randomly paired with students without attempting to find a 'fit'. However, students were given the option to change coaches if they did not get

on with their coach. By the very nature of IPA, the data and analysis are subjective at two levels, that is, there is a double sense-making taking place – the participant is making sense of their experience and the researcher is making sense of that (Smith et al., 2009). If an independent assessment of the benefits of coaching students in the university context is required, it would be necessary to introduce some objective measures on a larger sample size to fully understand the benefits of coaching in this context. However, this study has enabled the students' perspectives to come to the fore and detailed how they experienced and made sense of coaching.

### **Future research**

Further research could explore the sustainability of the achievements of coaching, by conducting follow up interviews, for example, a year after coaching had ended. It would be interesting to map the effects of coaching at different stages of the coaching to see, for example, if confidence was built up slowly or whether confidence increased after a certain number of sessions as this could be an indicator of the optimum number of sessions. It would be highly relevant to explore the benefits of personal tutors (university staff) taking a coaching approach compared to the benefits derived when professional coaches were employed. The effects of coaching on other university cohorts, such as final year undergraduate students, Master's students, students from different subjects and from different universities could be explored in further studies.

### **Authors**

**Natalie Lancer & Virginia Eatough**,  
Department of Psychological Sciences  
Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street,  
London WC1E 7HX.

### **Correspondence**

natalie.lancer@gmail.com



## References

- Arnett, J.J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469.
- Finlay, L. (2011). *Phenomenology for therapists, Researching the lived world*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Franklin, J. & Doran, J. (2009). Does all coaching enhance objective performance independently evaluated by blind assessors? The importance of the coaching model and content'. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 4(2), 128–44.
- Fried, R. & Irwin, J. (2016). Calmly coping: A Motivational Interviewing Via Co-Active Life Coaching (MI-VIA-CALC) pilot intervention for university students with perceived levels of high stress. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 14(1).
- Grant, A. (2003). The impact of life coaching on goal attainment, metacognition and mental health. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 31(3).
- Greene, T. (2004). Academic coaching: A new approach to supporting student success. *The National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development Innovation Abstracts*, 26(5).
- Gyllensten, K. & Palmer, S. (2007). The coaching relationship: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 2, 168–177.
- Gyllensten, K., Palmer, S., Nilsson, E.-K., Meland Regnér & Frodi, A. (2010). Experiences of cognitive coaching: A qualitative study. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 5(2), 98–108.
- Jackson, C. (2003). Transitions into higher education; gendered implications for academic self-concept. *Oxford Review of Education*, 29, 321–346.
- Lancer, N., Clutterbuck, D. and Megginson, D. (2016). *Techniques for coaching and mentoring* (2nd edn.). Oxford: Routledge
- Lizzio, A., Wilson, K. & Simons, R. (2002). University students' perceptions of the learning environment and academic outcomes: Implications for theory and practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(1).
- Naidoo, R. Shankar, A. & Veer, E. (2011). The consumerist turn in higher education: Policy aspirations and outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(11–12), 1142–1162.
- Prochaska, J.O. & DiClemente, C.C. (1986). The transtheoretical approach. In J.C. Norcross (Ed.), *Handbook of eclectic psychotherapy* (pp.163–200). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Robinson, C. & Gahagan, J. (2010). In practice: Coaching students to academic success and engagement on campus. *About Campus*, 15(4), 26–29.
- Short, E., Kinman, G. & Baker S. (2010). Evaluating the impact of a peer coaching intervention on well-being amongst psychology undergraduate students. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 5(2).
- Smith, J.A. Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Stevens, G. (2003). Late studentship: Academic aspiration, personal growth, and the death of the past. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 34(2).
- Sue-Chan, C. & Latham, G. (2004). The relative effectiveness of external, peer, and self-coaches. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 53(2).
- Swartz, S., Prevatt, F. & Proctor, B. (2005). A coaching intervention for college students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42(6)
- Turner, A., Hammond, C., Gilchrist, M. & Barlow, J. (2007). Coventry University students' experience of mental health problems. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 20(3).
- US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse (2012). *WWC review of the report: The effects of student coaching in college: An evaluation of a randomized experiment in student mentoring*. Retrieved 14 February 2017 from [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/SingleStudyReviews/wwc\\_studentcoaching\\_080712.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/SingleStudyReviews/wwc_studentcoaching_080712.pdf)
- Van Zandvoort, M., Irwin, J. & Morrow, D. (2009). Co-active coaching as an intervention for obesity among female university students. *International Coaching Psychology Review* 3(3), 191–206.
- Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology and Health*, 15(2), 215–228.
- Yorke, M. & Longden, B., (2004) *Retention and success in Higher Education*. Maidenhead: SRHE and Open University Press

Copyright of International Coaching Psychology Review is the property of British Psychological Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.