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## Invited article

# 'Yes Woman': A career coach reflects on the experience of doing a PhD and its contribution to coaching psychology

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*Natalie Lancer has been invited to submit this article as winner of the 'Student Project Award' at the 2019 Special Group in Coaching Psychology Conference. She discusses the nature of doing a PhD and the opportunities it affords, both personally and for the coaching psychology community, as well as providing an overview of her research.*



Natalie Lancer delivering her presentation on her PhD as winner of the Special Project Award

### My PhD experience

I AM A career coach for young people. I took the plunge and decided to take my professional development to the next level and do a PhD about the personal growth of

undergraduates who had had professional coaching. In my study, I did not coach the students myself, but advertised for volunteer coaches from my network. It was a logistically

ambitious project as I had to manage the recruitment of 12 coaches and students and interview the students four or five times, depending on whether they chose to have coaching for one or two years.

I never stopped working as a career coach, and so I did my PhD part-time at Birkbeck, University of London. It took seven years to complete. In my opinion, doing a PhD is both an academic test and a test of endurance. When taking on such a long and deep research project, it needs to be interesting enough to sustain you over a long period of time. Very few things interest me that much, but my topic was of genuine interest and so stood the test of time (or at least seven years).

One thing I did that I would encourage others to do, to invoke the film 'Yes Man', is to become 'Yes Woman': I took every opportunity to discuss my work with others or to talk about my work. This included taking part in my university's Three Minute Thesis, which is a competition many universities run. Having to speak about my thesis in three minutes involved a great deal of discipline and was itself useful to gain clarity on my work. I became the Special Group in Coaching Psychology's PsyPAG (postgrad) rep and was elected Secretary of SGCP. I also applied for the SGCP Project Award which I won in 2019. This resulted in presenting at the SGCP conference in July 2019, which I fully embraced. I knew that, in a room full of coaches, someone would be interested in my work. In fact, I made several connections at that event and went on to speak at events held at their universities or groups.

I also attended and spoke at a wide range of conferences, which were focused on different aspects of my work including education, the qualitative method I used, which was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and of course, coaching. Audiences' questions about my work required me to think about my work critically and gave me ideas for development. I was pro-active in finding out about podcasts and local radio programmes to be on, such as Birkbeck's Big

Ideas podcast. Attending a five-day writing retreat gave me the space to step back and think about my research – especially the overall points that I wanted to get across in my work. Volunteering to run Birkbeck's Shut Up and Write sessions online during the pandemic was the stepping stone for me to start Study Hubs, which are creative and motivating online writing retreats for undergraduates or postgraduates with a coaching twist (see [www.unicoach.org](http://www.unicoach.org) for details). I even co-wrote a book with David Clutterbuck and David Megginson *Techniques for coaching and mentoring* (Lancer et al., 2016).

My PhD started opening doors professionally about two years ago, when I applied to supervise Master's and PhD students at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, which aligns with my existential coaching approach. I am sure that my PhD will open more doors in the future. But apart from the instrumental benefits of doing a PhD, was I pleased, all in all, that I had taken it on? Truthfully, if I had known how much effort it would have taken at the very beginning, I probably would not have done it. At each stage, the lack of realistic knowledge I had about it enabled me to have a go at all! I was fortunate to have a very skilled and encouraging supervisor (Dr Virginia Eatough). It was during the recent pandemic that I found my mojo. It was as if I needed to know that there was nowhere to go and that I could give permission to myself to knuckle down and work for eight hours a day on my PhD.

Part of the 'Yes Woman' strategy was to take the opportunity to read extensively and consider a wide range of ideas. By the end, I had explored every avenue I had wanted to. Many avenues never saw the light of day in the finished work. I grew to embrace these dead ends as a necessary and enriching part of the process. This element of the 'Yes Woman' strategy allowed me to make creative connections between different bodies of literature. I believe this helped me develop the most original and innovative part of my thesis, namely The

Eight Tensions Framework, which has the potential to make a valuable contribution to coaching psychology. In order to explain this, I will now summarise my research. The thesis was called 'Navigating the tensions of undergraduate life: an existential phenomenological analysis of personal growth and the role of coaching at a UK university'.

### **The research**

My PhD research was about the personal growth of undergraduates who volunteered to participate in one-to-one coaching sessions with professional coaches. The study explores the experience of 14 undergraduates who had one (six sessions over a year) or two (12 sessions over two years) years of coaching at the beginning of the 2014/2015 academic year. Each student was interviewed at four or five time points, using one-to-one, semi-structured, open-ended interviews. We discussed university, coaching, their personal growth and what this meant to them and the data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). The 14 students were recruited from a Russell Group university, across various Arts and Social Science subjects. Fourteen coaches volunteered to give *pro bono* coaching in response to my notice posted on the European Mentoring and Coaching Council website and sent to my professional network. The coaches could use whichever coaching approach they preferred and was appropriate for their student-client.

### **The context**

This research comes at a time of concern of student mental health. Suicide rates in UK universities have never been higher (Coughlan, 2018) and there has been a fivefold increase in student disclosure of mental health problems in a decade (Burns, 2017).

A 2017 Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) survey found that 94 per cent of higher education providers have experienced a rise in demand for counselling services in the past five years and that at some universities, one in four students is using or waiting to use coun-

selling services (Thorley, 2017). The report includes several recommendations such as universities taking a whole-university approach to student mental health and wellbeing, as well as adopting early intervention and prevention strategies. Sir Anthony Seldon, former Master of Wellington College and current (2020) Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham advocates preventative strategies:

*Student suicide rates and emotional distress levels could be reduced at university if we acted differently... We are obsessed by reactive policy once students hit the bottom of the waterfall; we need to be putting preventative policies in place to prevent them ever tipping over the edge* (Cited in Coughlan, 2018).

Thus a coaching study is timely, as coaching may well be one such preventative measure that can be offered to students as a way to nip in the bud issues which could develop into mental health problems (Corrie, 2019).

### **The literature**

The benefits of both one-to-one and group coaching for students have been demonstrated in numerous studies. Most of these have used quantitative designs and measures such as the General Health Questionnaire (Short et al., 2010). For example, Grant (2003) found that group coaching for post-graduate 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.

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 disadvantaged undergraduates gain confi-

dence and reduce anxiety. Swartz, Prevatt and Proctor (2005) found that coaching helped undergraduates with ADHD organise themselves and make positive changes. Van Zandvoort, Irwin and Morrow (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.

However, there have been a limited number of coaching studies on non 'special case' and non-clinical students. The few studies found 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.

I 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'.

IPA's focus on the experience of the participants' world, as lived through their eyes, is important when considering how coaching benefited the students as it provides insight into their perspective as told through their words. Through shared themes, how the group as a whole benefited from coaching can be considered.

### **My position in the research**

I approached this research as an experienced coach and as someone who has worked with young people in an advisory capacity about university and course choice and as a teacher

for over ten years. I hope I have brought my practitioner experience to bear onto my empirical findings and theoretical thinking, indeed, it would have been impossible to bracket my life experiences, according to hermeneutical phenomenology, which forms the basis of my epistemological position.

I would also like to say why this research is important to me. When I was first at university, I felt that I had a lack of guidance on changing subjects and whether to do a semester abroad. I was not suffering from a mental illness and did not need to see a counsellor. However, there was no forum to discuss these matters and however helpful my friends and parents were in supporting me, it was not quite what I needed. I became unhappy at not tackling these dilemmas of opportunity head on and missing potential growth opportunities. It was by training as a coach some years after becoming a teacher that I realised, in retrospect, what I needed when I was at university was a coach to help me consider my choices and to help me own them.

### **The findings**

Coaching specifically helped the students in four main ways. Firstly, coaching gave the students a greater sense of control by imparting specific strategies for managing tasks and problems, which led to an increase in productivity and self-care. Secondly, coaching gave the students new ways of considering problems which led to specific actions. Thirdly, coaching helped the students achieve greater balance, focus and clarity in their day-to-day lives and plans. Finally, coaching increased the students' confidence, both socially and academically, leading them to feel more motivated.

Although the students had different coaches, their experience of the coaching itself was broadly similar. All but one participant described the coaching as a 'catalyst', or words to that effect, without prompting. For example, one student said if he had only known what he had learnt this year, the year before, he could have got a first in his degree. The students reflected on

the unique space and time for reflection that coaching affords. Furthermore, the students construed their coaches in a variety of roles including familial figures, objective professionals, role models, cheerleaders and motivators, validators and as similar to but different from a friend.

### The Eight Tensions Framework

In the final part of the thesis, I analysed the students' issues that they brought to coaching and derived eight tensions that

the students navigated at university, which I developed using an existential philosophical approach. This means viewing challenges as 'ordinary difficulties' (van Deurzen, 2015, p.185) which are faced by us all. It also means being realistic and acknowledging that there are 'trade-offs' for every position taken: we may have ambivalent feelings and emotions about a position on the tension as, inevitably, we give up something when we take a particular point on the pole. Taking an existential approach means to promote

Figure 1: Diagram of the Eight Tensions Framework



the idea that life should be lived deliberately and head-on, and in this case, enabling students to take ‘*charge of the possibilities in their lives*’ (van Deurzen, 2005, p.7).

The tensions include how students narrowed and expanded their interests, which became ‘Narrowing down vs Opening up’ or how they sometimes ploughed ahead or lay fallow, which became ‘Treading water vs Pushing Forward’ (See Figure 1 for the full list of tensions.). These tensions may be faced head on by taking an either/or approach, or by being viewed dialectally, so that a synthesis can be achieved, bringing the two opposite sides together (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Tensions cannot be solved once and for all. Rather, each engagement with a tension is ongoing. Furthermore, we will always have tensions in our lives and the same ones will reappear in different contexts and times (Cooper, 2015).

Coaches can support students in navigating these tensions, recognising both ends of each polarity and understanding that being human means to constantly live in these tensions (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). Examples of how coaches can support students navigate these tensions and an explanation of the existential underpinning of the tensions will be provided in trainings and workshops I am giving at the BPS and in future articles.

### **Implications and conclusions**

My research showed 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 and promote their

students’ personal growth, I recommend they consider investing in one-to-one coaching for all their students, and not wait until issues become psychological problems. As an alternative to professional coaches, existing staff members could be trained to take a coaching approach. I recommend that professionals who work with undergraduates, such as coaches, use The Eight Tensions Framework, in order to help students live deliberately and realistically for maximum growth.

### **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 subject and these results may not be valid for students on more structured, vocational courses such as Medicine or Engineering.

### **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 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.

### **Closing thoughts**

My ‘Yes Woman’ strategy, over the last seven years, enabled me to operate at my most

creative heights. The many different activities and engagements which I undertook provided fertile ground for the formulation, generation and cross-pollination of new ideas. I handed in my thesis feeling that I had said everything I wanted to say. However, just as in the Eight Tensions Framework, there were trade-offs. I had to miss some family holidays and often felt stressed. Luckily, I have a very understanding and supportive

family. I now have a better work-life balance. I am still that 'Yes Woman' but no longer have a thesis of 100,000 words looming over me. Bring it on!

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