

Unlocking potential: the transformative power of coaching for doctoral students

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ABSTRACT

Coaching doctoral students to enhance their well-being involves personalised guidance to improve emotional, social and academic skills, fostering self-awareness, and promoting positive coping mechanisms. The goal is to navigate challenges collaboratively, set meaningful goals, and develop strategies for sustained personal and academic success. This paper proposes a model that, by introducing additional support from a coach, can mitigate issues that often lead to students failing to complete their studies. The model is designed to support supervisors and students in managing their work environment, building confidence, and aiding supervisors in supporting students. The potential benefits of this model are significant, given the limited literature on postgraduate studies, coaching and well-being, despite the growing interest in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education represents a significant academic and professional development milestone, demanding rigorous intellectual inquiry, perseverance and dedication. It requires students to engage in rigorous research, critical thinking and scholarly discourse. Consequently, the journey towards obtaining a doctoral degree can be arduous and challenging, often characterised by high-stress levels, pressure, isolation and uncertainty as

students navigate complex research projects, academic responsibilities and personal commitments. Research by Evans *et al.* (2018) reports that graduate students are more prone to experiencing anxiety and depression when compared to the general population. Furthermore, it states that 41% of graduate students achieved moderate to severe anxiety on the GAD-7 scale compared to only 6% of the general student population. These alarming results underscore the urgent need for adequate support

KEYWORDS

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DOCTORAL STUDENTS

WELL-BEING

EDUCATIONAL COACHING MODEL

systems to help students navigate the academic landscape and maintain their well-being, academic progress, and overall success. Recognising the importance of comprehensive support, academic institutions and stakeholders increasingly focus on developing robust support mechanisms to nurture and empower doctoral students throughout their academic journey (Spencer, 2021). Effective support mechanisms contribute to students' well-being and academic success and foster a sense of belonging and

community within academic institutions (Golde *et al.*, 2006). By offering tailored support and guidance, institutions can empower doctoral students to overcome obstacles, develop resilience, and achieve their academic and professional goals.

Our experience working with doctoral students corroborates the evidence. It supports Spencer (2021) that graduate students often experience pressure and anxiety from navigating the transition to doctoral studies combined with the pressures of multiple roles of work, family and studies. Research shows that Coaching increases confidence, motivation and emotional awareness, and reduces stress (*ibid.*).

After conducting a thorough search using various online search engines and academic journals with keywords such as coaching, coaching in education, and academic coaching, it has become apparent that there is a significant amount of research that emphasises the need for a coach to provide support when faced with challenges in a business setting, as an undergraduate or while attending school. However, there is limited evidence for postgraduate students. Therefore, this paper explores a transformative approach to support doctoral students by introducing Coaching as part of the PhD supervisory team, and proposing that a coach can be a powerful tool for nurturing the overall well-being of doctoral students.

COACHING DEFINED

Coaching refers to helping someone improve their performance, skills or knowledge in a specific area. It involves working with individuals or groups to identify their goals, strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement, and then providing them with guidance, support and feedback to help them achieve their goals (Lane and De Wilde, 2018). Coaching can be practised in different formats, such as one-on-one coaching, group coaching, in-person coaching, or remote coaching via phone or video conferencing. The

ultimate goal of Coaching is to help the coachee(s) (individuals being coached) achieve their desired outcomes and reach their full potential. This may include reducing work stress as Wright (2003) argued; organisational change (Anderson, 2013); performance at work in a cross-cultural context (Peterson, 2007); improving communication and leadership skills (Wilson, 2014); career development (Scandura, 1992); group development and team building (Cuncha & Louro, 2000). The process involves using techniques and tools, such as active listening, questioning, feedback and goal-setting, to help coachees identify their strengths and weaknesses, overcome obstacles, and develop new skills and behaviours.

During the doctoral journey, as in other higher education, students face numerous challenges, which can include a lack of motivation and self-confidence and institutional and personal obstacles that emerge throughout their learning (Kearns *et al.*, 2008). Such obstacles, whether recognised or not, hinder productivity. Kearns *et al.* argue that the biggest hindrance is that students experiencing such challenges are reticent to share their feelings with people who can help. The development of skills and confidence that would empower students to speak up and share their struggles without feeling judged is an important factor of the research degree experience, as argued by Devine *et al.* (2013), and is necessary for progression in their research and preparation for the next step in their careers whether within or beyond academia.

Coaching underpins a collaborative and trusting relationship between the coach and the coachee to attain professional or personal goals as identified by the coachee (Spence and Grant, 2007). The coach's role is goal-oriented, and most coachees engage with coaches because there is a problem, a need to solve an issue, or a goal they wish to attain, and they are looking for support

in constructing and exploring a solution to that problem (Stanton *et al.*, 2016). Central to the coaching process is to help stretch and develop the coachee's current capacities or performance by helping them identify their desired goals. The role of a coach is to facilitate the learning and growth process of the coachee rather than provide solutions or advice. Through Coaching, coachees are empowered to take ownership of their actions, make informed decisions, and achieve their desired outcomes. The coach's role is to support the coachee in achieving their goal by helping them develop self-awareness and reflect on strengths and weaknesses, learning styles and working patterns (Grant, 2003).

There are also other areas to consider to ensure the success of the coach and coachee relationships, such as accountability on both parts. Record and Piascik (2002) noted that accountability is important to a successful coach and coachee relationship. The coach is responsible for creating a supportive and safe space to facilitate open communication which provides guidance that aligns with the goals identified by the coachee. This includes maintaining confidentiality and adapting strategies to support the needs of the coachee Spencer (2021). On the other hand, the coachee is responsible and accountable for engaging actively with the coaching process by clearly articulating the aspirations and challenges they face and being receptive to feedback and guidance offered by the coach. Therefore, successful Coaching hinges on mutual commitment to the coaching process, with both coach and coachee ensuring a collaborative effort to reach the coachee's goals.

However, when exploring the use of Coaching in education, it is minimal compared to the widespread use in other settings (Griffiths & Campbell, 2009; McCarthy, 2012). As mentioned earlier, Coaching is less prevalent in educational contexts where its potential is unrecognised. Kearns *et al.* (2008)

and McCarthy (2012) have argued that Coaching in education should be more consistently contemplated for doctoral students.

COACHING IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

As stated earlier, Coaching is a powerful method that can support learning by helping coachees develop the skills, mindset, and strategies they need to achieve their learning goals, reach their full academic potential, and achieve success. Many factors contribute to academic success, including self-efficacy, prior academic performance, demographic factors, personality traits, socioeconomic skills, and non-cognitive skills such as perseverance and motivation. Thus, it may not be possible to attribute academic success to Coaching alone. Grant (2003) conducted an early study with postgraduate students in Australia. Prior to the start of Coaching, participants were invited to complete a survey to ascertain their needs and identify their three top goals. Afterwards, they completed a post-coaching survey. It was found that participants attributed their success in achieving their goals to being more self-aware and managing stress, depression and anxiety, all of which contributed to a better quality of life. In 2010, Geber added to this trend with research findings claiming that Coaching accelerates research productivity in higher education, thus raising the completion rate. The study explored the impact of Coaching on eight early career researchers at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. Geber analysed the themes that emerged during participant interviews and demonstrated that Coaching improved student-supervisor partnerships, increased participant self-awareness, and contributed towards career progression.

Similarly, Godskesen & Kobayashi (2016) later conducted a mixed methods review of the benefits of coaching 88 doctoral students (66 took part) at the Technical

University of Denmark. The study found that 66 participants reported having Coaching as part of their doctoral journey as a positive experience. This review suggests that Coaching can benefit the academic community and improve relationships, research and professional skills. The study found that the participants reported that engaging with the coaching programme provided a positive experience and improved their communication with personal and emotional issues. Eighteen of the 66 participants who thought about quitting the doctoral programme continued their studies as they engaged with the coaching programme. While this study has reported good results, it is imperative to note that after engaging in such a programme, there was no evidence that the doctoral students had differing perspectives on the coaching programme.

Similar patterns were found in two pieces of research by Richardson *et al.* (2012) and Komarraju *et al.* (2009), who explored Coaching within early career academics, although, in both cases, it was unclear if the participants were early career academics working towards a PhD or had recently completed their studies. However, these anomalies do not detract from their contribution to the field, and there is debate about the need for coaching in higher education to support doctoral students or early career academics. Richardson *et al.* (2012) performed a meta-analysis of factors contributing to academic success. They identified 41 factors directly correlating with grade performance; the strongest was self-efficacy. They highlighted that prior academic performance and demographic factors contribute to academic success but to a lesser degree. Other studies, like Komarraju *et al.* (2009), show that personality traits impact academic achievement, and conscientiousness is correlated with grade performance. Finally, the importance of socioeconomic skills or non-cognitive skills such as perseverance and motivation have also been shown to

impact academic achievement positively. Although Grant's 2003 study took place before these studies, it is important to recognise that these factors or characteristics are essential to academic success.

THE PEDAGOGY OF COACHING DOCTORAL STUDENTS – A TRIPARTITE RELATIONSHIP MODEL

It has become evident that doctoral students face institutional and personal challenges, particularly given their increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds and cross-generational characteristics. A primary concern revolves around the completion rate of these students, with various factors influencing this outcome. These factors, as identified, include a lack of motivation, limited understanding of expectations, issues with self-regulation, mismatched student-supervisor dynamics, and difficulties integrating into social communities. Conversely, research by Godskesen and Kobayashi (2016) underscores the importance of factors that facilitate successful completion, such as high levels of motivation, clear expectations, positive student-supervisor relationships, and involvement in supportive social networks that bolster confidence and perseverance. This paper advocates for exploring coaching approaches tailored to doctoral students and proposes a model to expand upon existing perspectives, thereby enhancing the doctoral experience. This perspective, in part, supports that of other scholars such as Zeegers and Barron (2012), McAlpine *et al.* (2009), Bartlett and Mercer (2001), Croissouard (2008), Grant (2003), Grant and Green (2005), Kamler and Thomson (2014), and Lee and Green (2009), who advocate for a departure from traditional teaching methods – such as the Oxbridge model, in which students learn from an academic appointed as the expert or a supervisor based on disciplinary expertise rather than pedagogical ability – holistically positioning doctoral students

at the core of their academic trajectory and fostering collaborative relationships among stakeholders. The proposed model denotes the distinct role of each participant and emphasises the potential of a triadic relationship involving the coach, supervisor and student to support the doctoral journey.

Coaching and supervision diverge in their roles. The coach's responsibility encompasses listening, facilitating, and aiding the coachee in reaching their conclusions. Conversely, an element of power dynamics exists within the supervisory role, whether overt or not, where the student typically assumes the novice role. This dynamic creates an unequal relationship that can sometimes challenge the rapport and generate tension (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016).

Compared to the supervisor, the coach does not assume a role of power and has no interest, expertise, or intention to judge the student's work. This distinction fosters a confidential and equal space for students to reflect and share sensitive matters, unveil doubts, and expose vulnerabilities or weaknesses. Additionally, there is no obligation to attend coaching sessions or achieve mandatory goals, a departure from the expectations in the supervisory role.

Guccione and Hutchinson (2021) have provided a clear distinction between the role of the supervisor and that of the coach external to the supervisory team. They argue that the supervisory relationship inherently functions within a power framework, as supervisors and experts in the field typically wield the ultimate authority in evaluating the quality of the student's work. This authoritative role limits a supervisor's ability to inspire the PhD student effectively. In contrast, an external coach, not part of the supervisory team, operates from a different viewpoint. There is no specific vested interest in the research project's outcomes or the PhD student's decision to persevere or withdraw from their studies. Conversely, the coach supports

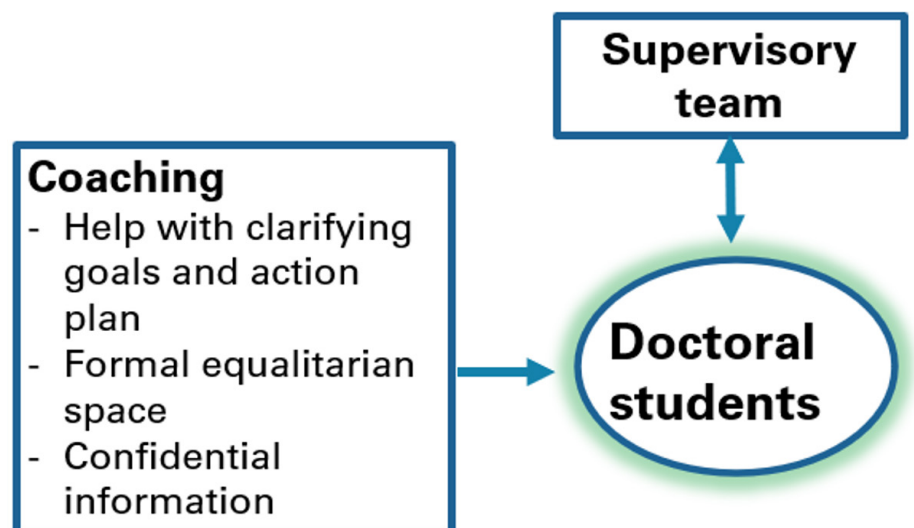
the PhD student in exploration and decision-making, addressing whatever concerns the PhD student brings to the forefront. Ideally, the student is leading in this dynamic.

In the model below (Fig 1), the coach is a valuable ally to the student, offering personalised support without interfering with the research element or disrupting the relationship between the supervisor and the student. The objective of the coach-student relationship is to empower the students, allowing them to navigate the challenges of their research and manage other responsibilities while benefitting from the additional resources and insights offered by the coach. With this relationship, the coach is not a recipient but a value to the student's success. This concept aligns with the findings of Godskesen and Kobayashi (2016), Danish researchers who explored Coaching for PhD students to enhance their sense of progression and encourage them to continue their studies. What distinguishes this proposed approach from previous studies is its emphasis on positioning Coaching as an adjunct resource distinct from the supervisory team. In contrast to conventional practices where the coach is integrated into the supervisory team, this proposal advocates for a separate coaching component, thus offering a novel perspective on doctoral support structures.

CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS IN USING COACHING FOR DOCTORAL SUPPORT

Implementing Coaching as an additional support presents a few challenges and requires careful navigation and consideration. In the first instance, this model has the propensity to create resistance to departure from the traditional delivery and structure of the programme due to the need for additional resources and coaches. This resistance may hinder the model's adoption into the existing programme, especially if it requires significant shifts in existing practices or resources. Secondly, the effectiveness of coaching doctoral students can be impacted by cultural differences. Cultural nuances, beliefs and communication styles vary widely among individuals and communities and can influence how doctoral students perceive and engage with coaching initiatives (Roth, 2017). Misinterpretations or misunderstandings from cultural differences can hinder rapport-building between coaches and students, affecting trust and open communication essential for effective coaching relationships. Also, cultural differences may shape doctoral students' attitudes towards seeking help, with some cultural backgrounds emphasising self-reliance and independence over seeking external support (*ibid.*). Additionally,

Figure 1: The pedagogy of coaching doctoral students – A tripartite relationship model



power dynamics influenced by cultural norms and hierarchies may impact the willingness of doctoral students to challenge or question coaching advice or feedback. Addressing these challenges requires coaches to be culturally competent, recognise and respect diverse cultural perspectives, adapt their coaching approach accordingly, and foster an inclusive and supportive environment conducive to all doctoral students' academic and personal growth (*ibid.*).

The third challenge of implementing the model is managing participants' expectations. Managing expectations also involves acknowledging that Coaching is not a panacea for all challenges encountered during doctoral studies but a supplementary resource to enhance personal and academic development. By fostering a collaborative and supportive environment setting clear boundaries and realistic expectations, the coaching model can effectively empower doctoral students to navigate the complexities of their academic journey with confidence and resilience.

Finally, effectively measuring the impact and outcomes of coaching doctoral students is still a new area of research, and robust evaluation frameworks and data collection methods are needed. This is challenging and can be complex and time-consuming to develop and implement.

GAPS IN LITERATURE – FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above model proposed has the potential to support students' well-being while matriculating through their PhD journey. Several gaps in the literature have been identified while searching through it for this paper. As mentioned, there is a dearth of literature that focuses on coaching doctoral students, although there is a growing body of literature on Coaching in various other contexts, including executive coaching, leadership coaching, and life coaching. In addition,

there are gaps in the literature on coaching models and approaches specifically designed for doctoral students, which aligns with the purpose of this paper. Developing tailored coaching frameworks that address doctoral students' unique needs and challenges could enhance their overall experience and success.

While there is evidence supporting the benefits of Coaching in other areas, firstly, more empirical studies are needed to examine the impact of Coaching on doctoral student outcomes. Research exploring the effects of Coaching on factors such as timely completion, research productivity, self-efficacy, well-being and career development could provide valuable insights.

Secondly, if Coaching becomes more prevalent in supporting doctoral students, there is a need for guidelines and competencies specifically tailored to coaching this population. Understanding the skills, knowledge and training required for coaches to support doctoral students effectively can contribute to the professionalisation and quality of coaching services in academia.

Thirdly, research exploring how Coaching can address the unique needs associated with cultural diversity, inclusion and equity in doctoral education is currently limited and needs further exploration. This is of great importance as, more recently, there has been an increasing number of doctoral students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and their experiences and challenges can vary significantly (Roth, 2017).

Finally, with most studies exploring short-term coaching interventions, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of Coaching throughout the entire doctoral journey are scarce. Therefore, understanding how Coaching can support students at different stages of the process, including transitions, milestones, and challenges, would provide valuable insights into the long-term effectiveness of Coaching for doctoral students. ■

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