


Academic Paper

The challenges of personal tutoring in higher education: Applying a coaching approach at a UK higher education institution

Saquifa Seraj  (Northumbria University)
Ruth Leggett (Newcastle University)

Abstract

This research explores the lived experiences of personal tutors in the Higher Education (HE) sector in order to understand the effectiveness of implementing a coaching approach to personal tutoring. The qualitative research comprised five semi-structured interviews with academic staff performing the personal tutor role in a single HE institution in the United Kingdom. The interviews explored the current issues with the personal tutoring system and sought perspectives on whether adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring would be beneficial for students. The findings indicate that adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring facilitates the development of resilient, self-confident and self-reliant individuals.

Keywords

coaching, personal tutoring, higher education, personal tutors, student development

Article history

Accepted for publication: 10 January 2023

Published online: 01 February 2023



© the Author(s)

Published by Oxford Brookes University

Introduction

The unprecedented global pandemic caused by the Coronavirus (COVID 19) pandemic affected Higher Education (HE) significantly. The effects of the pandemic, which have been described as disruptive and transformative, had extraordinary implications for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Green, Anderson, Tait, Tran, 2020). Some HE students in England began questioning the value for money they were obtaining, while the institutions went through a phase of radical transformation in how they deliver teaching and learning. More than ever before, HEIs were forced to rethink their relationship with students.

Personal tutors play a key role in maintaining relationships with students in HE. In the current HE context, each student is allocated a personal tutor. The personal tutor is usually a member of

academic staff that the student would have contact with, through the delivery of their chosen programme of study. This one-to-one relationship is one of the many ways institutions support and empower students in their learning (Wisker, Exley, Antoniou, & Ridley, 2008). The role of personal tutors was reviewed extensively by Yale (2019). The role includes fulfilling a number of academic and pastoral support activities. The importance of the role is further emphasised by describing it as a manifestation of the relationship between the University and the student (Yale, 2019). Similarly, Owen (2002) also emphasised the significance of personal tutoring by describing its role within the support system for students as an 'anchor'. Other researchers (for example: Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Stott, Zaitseva & Cui, 2014) have highlighted the role of personal tutors in improving the student experience in HE. However, there is very little primary research outlining how best to approach and implement personal tutoring in HE. One method of delivery would be to adopt a coaching approach. In this respect, Lochtie, McIntosh, Stork, and Walker (2018), recommend solution-focussed coaching to facilitate personal tutors' conversations with students.

In recent years, coaching has evolved as a significant human development approach that is widely adopted by organisations to improve the performance of their employees (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2018). Coaching is increasingly regarded as an effective method of supporting others in all kinds of personal and professional development activities such as, leadership development, personal development, academic development, supervision, and career development. A recent example is the use of coaches on a government initiative to support young people in to work (Brown, 2021). If we take an overview of the activities involved in coaching such as listening, empathising, providing information, joint planning, questioning, and clarifying learning objectives, it becomes clear that there are similar skills and activities in the personal tutoring role. The Learning and Skills at Work survey undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has identified coaching as one of the most effective learning and development strategies (CIPD, 2021), further confirming the effectiveness of coaching in individual learning and development.

In the current context of HE, when students are questioning the value of higher education and where Institutions are desperate to discern effective modes of student engagement, the key question that arises is, how can the personal tutoring role be delivered to effectively provide support to students? While personal tutoring and coaching as separate topics have been widely researched, there is a research gap in terms of sufficient primary research on the application of a coaching approach to personal tutoring in an HE context.

Literature Review

Personal Tutoring in Higher Education

Dobinson-Harrington (2006) asserts that the role of personal tutors originates from traditional Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge where all undergraduate students were allocated to a tutor who acted in place of their parents. In today's context, Advance HE (2017) defines a personal tutor as, "a member of academic staff who provides academic guidance and pastoral support during their course of study." This aligns with the pastoral model of personal tutoring proposed by Earwaker (1992). The three models of personal tutoring proposed by Earwaker (1992) are pastoral, professional and curriculum models. In the professional model, personal tutoring is delivered by trained specialist who are members of the University's centralised services. The curriculum model embeds personal tutoring within timetabled module activities. Walker (2020) confirms that the pastoral model is the most common out of the three models of personal tutoring proposed by Earwaker (1992).

Academic guidance and pastoral support encompasses, guidance on academic processes and procedures, personal support, referral to other sources of support and information, supporting student integration to university life (Thomas, 2006). Personal tutors have been described as the interface between the student and the University with the key responsibility of being the 'face' of the University (Wooton, 2006). Yale (2019) called to attention to the lack of research on personal tutoring and attributed this to the absence of a consistent approach amongst HE institutions.

In order to explore the potential of adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring, it is important to explore what coaching is, and what are some of the coaching approaches that could be applied.

Defining Coaching

According to CIPD (2021), there is no 'one' definition of coaching that is agreed among professionals. The interpretation of the meaning of coaching is provided by Garvey (2004) as a skilled activity which is focused on the enhancement of skills and performance. The definition by Garvey (2004) refers to the role of the coach as being skilled and assumes that the coachee has a need to enhance their skills and/or performance. Contrary to Garvey's (2004) definition, the definition provided by Whitmore (2009, p.10) captures the essence of coaching with the following statement, "coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximise their own performance." This definition provides an understanding of coaching from the coachee's perspective.

Bachkirova et al (2014) further define coaching as:

... a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee and potentially for other stakeholders (p1)

Similar to CIPD (2021), this definition recognises coaching as a development approach, however, the undertone of the definition leans toward the coach's role in the coaching relationship.

Some of the other 'help providing' or developmental relationships that could be applied to the personal tutoring role include mentoring and counselling. Hezlett and Gibson (2007) define mentoring as a developmental relationship in which the personal and professional growth of a less experienced individual is supported by a more experienced individual. In contrast to coaches, mentors are often required to have a specialist knowledge in the field of their mentee or in career or professional development (CIPD, 2008). This implies that an academic taking a mentoring approach in their personal tutoring role may not be appropriate, as they may not be career development specialists or specialists in the student's field of study. In contrast, counselling is more focussed on examining the causes of a current issue and explores the past in more detail compared to coaching and mentoring which are present and future focused (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2014). The role of the counsellor emerges from a 'therapeutic' tradition and requires qualifications and honed skills, thereby rendering an inappropriate approach in a personal tutoring role performed by academics. Hence, it can be deduced that coaching is the most appropriate out of the three help-providing or developmental relationships for personal tutoring.

Coaching as a developmental approach is also emphasised by Wisker et al. (2008), who described coaching as a one-to-one learning relationship with the aim to develop competence and improve the performance of the coachee. Similarly, Brockbank and McGill (2006) describe coaching as a practical helping tool to encourage the learning and development of an individual and Rogers (2016, p.7) agree that "coaching is the art of facilitating another person's learning, development, wellbeing and performance." Therefore, according to contemporary definitions of coaching, there would appear to be an alignment between coaching and the aims and function of the personal

tutoring role in HEIs. To examine the 'fit' between a coaching approach and personal tutoring, it is important to examine some of the coaching approaches that could be applied in more detail.

Potential Coaching Approaches for Use in Personal Tutoring

Person-Centred Coaching

The person-centred coaching approach emerged from the work of Carl Rogers in the 1940s and 1950s and is based on therapeutic traditions. It is based on two key principles. The first one is actualising tendency. Rogers (1963) defined self-actualising tendency as the universal motivation in humans that results in their growth, development, and autonomy. The self-actualising tendency of individuals is realised through genuine relationships where people feel accepted and understood (Joseph, 2018). This means that the person-centred approach to coaching is founded on the premise that all individuals are driven by their intrinsic motivation for growth and development towards optimal functioning (Joseph, 2018). However, in order to ignite the intrinsic motivation for growth and development, the right conditions need to be provided. This forms the second of the two key principles of person-centred coaching. These principles form the foundation of all different coaching approaches (Joseph, 2018). In the context of HE, for a coaching approach to personal tutoring to be successful, personal tutors need genuine relationships with their tutees to make them feel understood and accepted. This will facilitate the release of the students' actualising potential (Rogers, 1963). Familiarity between the student and their personal tutor, for example through lectures and seminars, helps in developing genuine relationships which is a prerequisite for successful coaching.

Cognitive Behavioural Coaching

The basic premise of cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) is that the thinking pattern of an individual heavily influences how they feel, and this has an impact on stress levels and individual performance (Neenan & Dryden, 2002). Palmer and Szymanska (2007, p.86) defined cognitive behavioural coaching as, "an integrative approach which combines the use of cognitive behavioural framework to enable clients to achieve their realistic goals."

According to Williams, Palmer and Edgerton (2018), the primary goals of CBC are: to help the coachee in achieving realistic goals; improve self-awareness of the cognitive and emotional barriers that maybe preventing the individual from attaining their goals; help in developing effective thinking and behavioural skills; enhance self-confidence and self-acceptance and enable the individual to be their own coach. The role of the coach is to develop a collaborative relationship with the coachee to help them focus on solving problems in a structured and systematic manner (Neenan and Palmer, 2001). The coach supports and challenges the coachee by utilising the Socratic questioning method and by encouraging active participation and discussion. This results in heightened self-awareness and self-esteem (Dinos & Palmer, 2015). CBC is suitable for application in coaching higher education students as William et al. (2018) have suggested that CBC can be applied in any coaching context where the coachees' self-limiting thinking is undermining their performance.

Solution-Focused Coaching

Similar to cognitive behavioural coaching, solution-focused coaching originates from cognitive behavioural therapy (Lochti, et al., 2018). Lochti et al postulate that solution focussed coaching can reduce any sense of insecurity or incapacity that students may feel regarding themselves and their situation. The primary aim of solution focused coaching is goal achievement. Devine, Meyers and Houssemand (2013), emphasise that this approach empowers and encourages coachees to develop solutions to problems by drawing upon their own resources. In solution focused coaching, the role of the coach is to help the coachee express a vision of their desired future (Grant and Cavanagh, 2018). The coach then helps the coachee to refine their thinking and actions to take in

order to achieve their future desired state. There are two fundamental philosophical assumptions that underpin solution-focused coaching (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018). The first one is that events in the various spheres of life are not problematic. The way individuals think and discuss events with others transforms those events into problems. Secondly, the solution focused approach sees the coachee as being capable of solving their own problems. The coachee is seen as a fully-functioning and resourceful individual. According to Grant and Cavanagh (2018), the key principles of solution focus coaching are: i) focussing on the solution instead of trying to understand the problem and the cause of the problem; ii) solution focused coaching assumes that a positive change is inevitable and the coachee will take the steps necessary to work towards the change outside of the coaching sessions; iii) the coach and the coachee are in a collaborative working relationship. The coach recognises that the coachee is the expert in their own life and works with the coachee to help in developing solutions, encouraging behaviour change through reframing. Reframing here refers to taking a different perspective to look at a situation. This can lead to thinking and behaviour change resulting in individual success. The final principle which is central to solution-focused coaching is being pragmatic and flexible. Lochtie et al. (2018) advocate the use of solution focused coaching as a mechanism of effective personal tutoring.

The GROW Model

The GROW model combines behavioural coaching and solution-focused coaching (Devine, Meyers & Houssemand, 2013). It is described as one of the best-known models for structuring coaching sessions (Grant, 2011). The key advantage of the model is that it is accessible to all and requires no specialist knowledge (Whitmore, 2009). Originally developed by Graham Alexander in the 1980s (Alexander, 2016), the model was popularised by Whitmore (2009). The acronym GROW stands for: **G**oals, **R**eality, **O**ptions, and **W**hat next? (Whitmore, 2009). In applying this model, the coachee is encouraged to select a coaching topic and set the goals that he/she wants to achieve. Then the coachee is guided to carry out a reality check where they identify their current situation and resources that they already have in order to achieve the goal. Next, the coachee is encouraged to identify the options, strategies or course of actions that can be taken to achieve the goal. Finally, the coachee identifies the steps that they are going to take to achieve their goal. The simplicity of the model has been described as a disadvantage to the model (Grant, 2011). However, the simplicity of the model can be an advantage in terms of learning and implementing the model by personal tutors in their conversation with students.

Research examining the impact of coaching approaches on an individual, advocate that engaging in such processes help to build self-regulation and resilience (Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009). Lawton-Smith (2015) also suggested that coaching can play an important role in enhancing resilience and well-being. When considering the defined purpose of coaching as being concerned with learning, development, well-being, and performance (Rogers, 2016) this appears to align well with the purpose of personal tutoring in an HE context.

Previous Studies on Coaching Approaches in Personal Tutoring

Previous studies that have examined the use of coaching in personal tutoring and education, include Stork and Walker (2015), who provide a clear connection between personal tutoring and coaching while emphasising that coaches are not personal tutors, but personal tutors can be coaches. The authors stressed that utilising coaching techniques as a tool for personal tutoring can enhance the effectiveness of the support provided to learners. A study into students' views on what they found helpful and unhelpful in terms of 'support' was conducted by Jacklin and Riche (2009). The focus of their research was the wider provision of student support (encompassing learning support, personal tutoring, material resources, information, advice and guidance) within an HE context. Interestingly, one of their findings was that it was not so much about the nature of the support, but more about the nature of the interaction between the student and member of staff. Their findings also propose a shift from the notion of 'support' as a mainly reactive response to

student problems, to that of 'supportive' (and proactive) contexts and cultures within the HE Institution.

Wang and Lu (2020), designed, implemented and evaluated a coaching programme for a group of US college students. Their findings demonstrated that coaching could be a promising approach to enhancing students' various positive dispositions, essential for them to be self-directed and resilient learners. Similarly, the developmental effects of coaching on undergraduate UK University students investigated by Lancer and Eatough (2018), found that the personal and academic development of the students was enhanced by coaching. Another study by Lane and Wilde (2018) with post-graduate, doctoral students at a UK University revealed the positive impact of coaching on students' wellbeing and performance. The positive benefits of coaching identified by this study include, overcoming procrastination, developing confidence, improving personal effectiveness, and an improvement in student wellbeing. Devine, Meyers and Houssemand (2013) conducted a systematic literature review using the key words 'coaching' and 'education' and concluded that coaching is a powerful tool to support the learning and development of students and other actors in an education setting. The authors particularly asserted that solution-focused coaching is easy to learn and is suitable for extensive use in the education system. They also confirmed that the GROW model is very accessible for use in the education sector.

Summary

The above examination of some of the key concepts in personal tutoring and coaching approaches provides evidence that there are many similarities between what coaching and personal tutoring aim to achieve. Both coaching and personal tutoring are developmental relationships where the coach or the personal tutor supports the development of the coachee or the personal tutee. However, during the process of carrying out this literature review, it was identified that a coaching approach to personal tutoring is not a widely researched area. Therefore, this research aims to address the following two questions:

1. What are the benefits of a coaching approach to personal tutoring?
2. What are the barriers to adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring?

Methodology

Context of the Study

In order to address the research questions, a small-scale exploratory study was carried out in one HE institution in the north of England. It set out to gather the views and perspectives of academic staff currently involved in the personal tutor (PT) role. The research set out to explore the potential benefits and the barriers to adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring for the academic, personal and professional development of higher education students on taught programmes.

The HE institution has a large business school where policy dictates that all undergraduate and taught post-graduate students must have a named personal tutor. The named personal tutor should be an academic member of staff. The role of the personal tutor is to enhance students' academic experience, performance, professional development, and wellbeing. This reflects the 'pastoral model' proposed by Earwaker (1992). The introduction of the personal tutoring policy in the business school is relatively new and faculty were keen to learn whether a coaching approach to personal tutoring would benefit students and tutors.

The research took an interpretivist philosophical position, and the exploratory nature of the research rendered a qualitative method as the best option for this research. The perspectives and

views of the participants were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The institution's ethics procedure was conformed with at all stages of the research.

Participants

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with five members of academic staff from the business school (Table 1). A purposive sampling method was adopted to select the participants for this research. In purposive sampling, the researcher's judgement is applied to select participants who can best answer the research questions (Saunders, et al., 2019). All the interview participants were personal tutors and have some knowledge and understanding of coaching. Three out of the five participants have had previous experience of coaching in different settings.

Table 1: Participant Information

Participant Number	Post	Key Roles	Length of Service	Previous Experience of Coaching
1	Senior Lecturer	Programme Leader and Module Tutor	6 years	No
2	Senior Lecturer	Module Tutor	10 years	Yes
3	Senior Lecturer	Programme Leader and Module Tutor	3 years	Yes
4	Lecturer	Programme Leader and module Tutor	5 years	Yes
5	Senior Lecturer	Programme Leader	5 years	No

Data Collection

The data for this research was primarily collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer the flexibility to ask questions beyond the interview schedule prepared. This facilitates in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, while remaining focussed on the topic of investigation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). An interview schedule with 11 questions was prepared by the researcher following the principles of semi-structured interview. The open-ended questions in the interview schedule were designed to answer the research questions highlighted earlier. More specifically, the interview questions sought participants' experience and perceptions of applying a coaching approach to personal tutoring. All interviews were conducted between April and June 2020. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, four out of the five interviews were conducted via the Microsoft Teams application. The fifth and final interview was conducted face to face at the end of the first lockdown, as social distancing restrictions related to the pandemic were eased by the UK Government.

Data Analysis

The primary data collected through semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as systematic, flexible, and accessible. In this research, key themes from the data were identified, and analysed to answer the research questions. The analysis took place manually as there were only a small number of transcripts to analyse. The key themes identified in the interview transcripts are categorised as sub-

themes under the two main areas of exploration that are related to the two research questions. These are presented in the findings section below.

Findings

Benefits of adopting a coaching approach in personal tutoring

Developing self-reliant, self-capable individuals and improving resilience in students

The findings of the study suggest that many of the academic staff interviewed as part of this research believe in the benefits of using a coaching approach in personal tutoring. They saw the key benefits as being developing self-reliant and self-capable individuals and improving resilience in students.

I think we would develop more self-reliant, self-capable individuals. Who can be independent and who can take more responsibility for their own studies and also for their own futures ... because now I feel that we are actually spoon feeding them. – Interviewee 5.

It's about this resilience isn't it, it's about getting them to come up with ideas themselves. Instead of this constant reliance on somebody else will sort this situation out. It's about the life skills, ... we've got to be making them more resilient. More able to make decisions, more able to think through issues. I think we'll be doing them a massive favour if we could do that coaching approach. – Interviewee 2

The reality of personal tutoring

While reflecting on the benefits of adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring, the participants appeared doubtful as to whether their role is one of coach in the PT role:

"I don't think it's (personal tutoring) very much the coaching or personal development of your tutee ... it's (personal tutoring) very much about problem solving." – Interviewee 1

Similarly, interviewee 2 who is an experienced coach and has a coaching qualification commented that,

I don't think I use a coaching structure at all in my personal tutoring system. [pause] I would love to, but I think it's because often it's more reactive, the talk, as opposed to proactive ... They're (students) asking you to give them solutions to something so, it's more of a fact type meeting– Interviewee 2

The problem-solving nature of personal tutoring was also highlighted by interviewee 3,

... I feel that I need to be a mother actually, yes, to calm them down. Because if they are in tears, you cannot ask them actually "what do you think would be best for you?" You know, because I think they are so stressed that they need some kind of reassurance and support. – Interviewee 5.

Nevertheless, the conversations surrounding the benefits of adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring led to the context where the tutors have successfully guided students by adopting a coaching approach. It was concluded that coaching approach to personal tutoring is beneficial in the curricular model of personal tutoring.

Coaching approach is beneficial in the curricular model of personal tutoring

The interviewees have indicated that they have had the opportunity to successfully adopt a coaching approach in other contexts, such as in a classroom while facilitating student work, while supervising dissertation students and when students voluntarily approach them for guidance. This is reflective of the 'curricular model' (Earwaker, 1992) of personal tutoring.

when I facilitate in another module that I teach on in teams I do think I use a coaching technique then. And in the past, we used to be the personal tutors for those groups, and I do feel that when I was facilitating teams as their personal tutor, I was using that coaching strategy more. – Interviewee 2

So, one of the students, they were really struggling with their dissertation and work and everything and they were really adamant they wanted to carry on. And so, I asked the questions, we had the (coaching) conversation about what they actually wanted the outcome to be of their dissertation and the marks they wanted to get. – Interviewee 3

The findings also suggest that there are some major barriers for PTs being able to adopt a coaching approach.

Barriers to adopting a coaching approach in personal tutoring

Time allowed for personal tutoring

In the HE institution where this research took place, PTs were generally advised to meet each student for around 10 minutes per session at the time of this research. This was proving a barrier to PTs in using anything other than a directive approach.

...instead of me going 'well, you need to do X, Y and Z, perhaps we need to explore what you think you should do'. But that takes more than 10 minutes so when they come to your door and you've got a 10-minute slot before the next one is coming to your door. Then no, I couldn't see it working in 10 minutes. - Interviewee 2

I think it's almost impossible (to adopt a coaching approach to personal tutoring) isn't it really? You know because we're saying you need to build a relationship; we probably need an hour just for that initial kind of you know "this is me; this is how we can work together". You know trying to find out their aspirations and their potential and what they want to do, what they want to achieve. – Interviewee 4

Allocation and number of personal tutees

To exacerbate the issue of lack of time, the random allocation of students to members of academic staff creates issues in building relationships between students and staff.

...I think first of all ... (the faculty) need to assign the tutees based on the tutor who comes to their class, yeah not randomly, yeah? That's the first thing. The second thing is ... (the faculty) need to reduce the number of tutees (per tutor). – Interviewee 1

The importance of building relationship in coaching

Each of the barriers identified above, are contributing to a situation where it is difficult for a relationship to be built between the personal tutor and student.

I think for personal tutoring you need to have a personal relationship and if you have a personal relationship then the tutees could be free to tell you their problems and their development

needs. But, at the moment there is no opportunity to discuss the development needs. - Interviewee 1

Similarly,

I think you need to be able to build a relationship with people to have an effective coaching relationship. I don't think it's (coaching is) something that you can necessarily do off the bat with people. Especially students who aren't used to that kind of interaction. – Interviewee 4

...last year ... we were personal tutor to our students and that worked really well. Because you had them on a yearlong module, you knew them. And then if they had any problems, they came to you. And this year I still had people come to me even though I know that their personal tutor is somebody completely different. But they come to me because they've seen me every week for a year. – Interviewee 3

Further findings suggest that other barriers to enabling a coaching approach to personal tutoring in HE, can be attributed to the student's attitude to personal tutoring (from an academic's perspective) and the levels of interest and motivation on behalf of the academic staff taking on the role of PT.

Students attitude to personal tutoring

Interviewees stated that many students only use the PT system when they have an issue. For example, Interviewee 2 mentioned:

"They're (the students are) asking you to give them solutions to something so, it's more of a fact type meeting. " – Interviewee 2.

"...if they (the students) come to you with any problem, it's like you're (personal tutor) solving the problem." – Interviewee 1

The interviewees did state that it may be simply down to the students not fully understanding the PT role or how it could benefit them.

It is a role that is sometimes quite frustrating because it's a role that seems to be imposed on students at our institution... not all students necessarily want to meet with their personal tutor. So, sometimes it's quite frustrating in the role because I'm quite eager to be their personal tutor and they are perhaps reticent to have a personal tutor. Or don't necessarily see the point of a personal tutor... – Interviewee 2.

Academic interest in personal tutoring

Some interviewees expressed their view that not all academic members of staff are interested in personal tutoring. There was reference to the faculty placing greater emphasis on publishing and obtaining research grants as opposed to teaching and providing pastoral care to students. For example:

...you know they (the University) want you to be producing four-star papers or getting grant income. So, this kind of stuff (personal tutoring) which is actually fundamental to what we do as a university, they don't place enough value on. I think that's another reason why people (academic members of staff) don't engage with it because they're like "well, yeah, I get an hour a year, I'm not going to be thanked by the university. So, I'm just not really going to do it". I don't think unless you've got that intrinsic drive to do it, I don't think people think it's worth it. – Interviewee 4

The other theme that emerges in the findings is staff highlighting the need for training and development of academic staff if they are to adopt a coaching approach in their personal tutoring role. The University's Personal Tutoring Policy (2019, p.1) states that,

Staff will receive information and training to support their role as personal tutors; this is included as part of their induction. Faculties should ensure that staff can receive further training as part of their continuing professional development.

In order to ascertain what types of training interventions would be appropriate to fulfil the development needs of the academic personal tutors and enable them to adopt a coaching approach, the interviewees were asked for their opinion on the matter.

Interviewees 2 and 3 suggested a few practical workshops where the personal tutors get to practice coaching and learn about the basic principles of coaching. Both agreed that the training provided should not be too in-depth; that only the basic knowledge, principles, and tools of coaching, such as the GROW model (Whitmore, 2009) is sufficient to engage in a coaching conversation with personal tutees. Interviewee 4 suggested a short workshop or a short course to familiarise academics with a coaching approach to personal tutoring. Interviewee 5 also suggested a short course to acquire some basic knowledge of coaching and to practise coaching. The importance of supervised coaching practise was emphasised.

Discussion and Conclusion

The participants interviewed acknowledged that a coaching approach to personal tutoring would be beneficial to students. They identified such benefits as developing resilient, self-confident and motivated learners, agreeing with the findings of research by Lawton-Smith (2015) and Wang and Lu (2020). Similar to Lancer and Eatough's research (2018), respondents also felt that students' personal and academic development could be enhanced through coaching.

While discussing the benefits of a coaching approach to personal tutoring, the participants indicated students predominantly contact their personal tutors when they have problems and need to find a solution. This can be seen as an opportunity for the personal tutors to adopt a solution-focused (Lochtie, et. al. 2018) or cognitive behavioural (William et al., 2018) coaching approach. Further, the personal tutors will also benefit from adding the GROW model (Whitmore, 2009) to their toolkit to facilitate conversations with students. The GROW model combines behavioural and solution focused approaches to coaching (Devine, Meyers & Houssemand, 2013). Nevertheless, in situations where a student contacts a personal tutor with a problem, most of the participants interviewed would adopt a more directive and solution giving approach. By contrast, a coaching approach would advocate asking the student to identify their best course of action themselves (Whitmore, 2009) or help the student in reframing the problem (Lochtie, 2018). A coaching approach to problem solving could only help in building resilience, confidence and improve motivation in students, if the personal tutors cease opportunities to move from reactive to a supportive role (Jacklin and Riche (2009). This could be done by applying some of the coaching approaches described earlier in this article, such as: solutioned-focused coaching, cognitive behavioural coaching, GROW model. A coaching approach will encourage students to develop solutions to problems by drawing upon their own resources (Devine, Meyers & Houssemand, 2013). It is possible to adopt a coaching approach as a 'way of being' (Whitmore, 2009) in communicating with others. However, this would require some skills development sessions in coaching skills for the personal tutors.

The main barriers to a coaching approach to personal tutoring identified were random allocation of personal tutees, which means that the tutees were allocated to tutors they do not know. As a result, the tutees were reluctant to meet with their personal tutors. The basic tenet of a coaching approach

which originates from person-centred coaching (Rogers, 1963) dictates that, in order for coaching to be successful, the coach should have an unconditional positive regard for the coachee and the coachee is aware of it to some degree (Joseph, 2018). It is not possible to engage in a successful coaching relationship unless the necessary and sufficient conditions (Rogers, 1957) for coaching is available. Therefore, a lack of familiarity with the personal tutors hinders a coaching approach to personal tutoring. This barrier could be overcome by allocating students to tutors that they know through lectures and seminars. The personal tutors interviewed mentioned other difficulties in adopting a coaching approach, such as the time allocated per tutee; number of tutees allocated per tutor, which is sometimes quite large; staff interest in personal tutoring; student interest in personal tutoring. Institutions need to address these issues identified in order to support a coaching approach to personal tutoring.

All the interviewees agreed that some training and development for members of staff engaged in the personal tutoring role would be helpful. The findings suggested that a short course, designed to provide some key knowledge, principles and tools of coaching would be useful to personal tutors. The course should also provide the participants with opportunities to practice coaching in action.

In light of the COVID-19 situation, if HEIs are to support students and provide an 'anchor' (Owen 2002) during such difficult times, a re-think of this vital staff-student relationship is needed. Students may be in danger of feeling remote and isolated, and this will impact hugely on their ability to achieve their academic, personal and professional potential. There is an urgent need for universities to identify ways of engaging with students. The personal tutoring role contributes to student engagement as it is seen as a key interface between the student and the University (Wooton, 2006). Before considering whether adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring would be beneficial, the practical barriers identified in this research need to be addressed. These are the academic staff to student ratio in personal tutoring, the time allocated in staff workloads for personal tutoring and how students are allocated to tutors. The way in which staff and students initially make contact and whether small group sessions or technology could be used to support initial student engagement warrants further investigation.

In conclusion, adopting a coaching approach with students would promote student well-being and resilience, support their personal and academic development, and ultimately improve the overall student experience. Learning and development opportunities for academic staff engaged in the role of personal tutor would undoubtedly provide them with important skills and confidence in their role. The benefits of learning and development intervention with regards to coaching will help them in many other academic staff/student engagement situations such as facilitating group sessions and dissertation supervision.

Limitations and Future Research

The research conducted is small-scale with a small number of academic staff at one University only. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised. However, the small-scale nature of the study allowed for in-depth exploration of the experiences and perceptions of the personal tutors. The findings of the research provide valuable insights with regard to challenges faced by personal tutors which HEs could take into consideration to inform and update the design of their personal tutoring systems. However, it is limited to the perspectives of the personal tutors only. Future research on the topic could explore the perspectives of students as well as tutors. Large scale comparative research between multiple UK HEIs would further help in shaping policies and practices regarding approaches to personal tutoring. Finally, an international perspective on the topic would facilitate in identifying and adopting best practice methods from around the world.

References

- Advance HE. (2017). *National Teaching Fellow 2017: Personal Tutors*. Retrieved 05th July 2022 Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/personal-tutors>.
- Alexander, G. (2016). Behavioural coaching – the GROW model. In J. Passmore (Ed.), *Excellence in Coaching: The Industry Guide*, (3rd ed., pp. 99 -111).
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Brooman, S. and Darwent, S. (2014). Measuring the beginning: a quantitative study of the transition to higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(9), 1523-1541. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2013.801428.
- Brockbank, A. and McGill, I. (2006). *Facilitating reflective learning through coaching and mentoring*, London: Kogan Page.
- Brown, L. (2021, April 12). Government recruits job coaches to help young people facing barriers to work. *People Management*. Retrieved 20th June 2021 Available at: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/government-recruits-job-coaches-to-help-young-people-facing-barriers-to-work#gref>.
- Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2015). *Business Research Methods* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CIPD. (2021). *What are coaching and mentoring?* Retrieved 5th August 2021 Available at: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/development/coachingmentoring-factsheet>.
- Cox, E., Bachirova, T. and Clutterbuck, D. (Eds.). (2018). *The complete handbook of coaching* (3rd ed.). Sage: London.
- Cox, E., Bachirova, T. and Clutterbuck, D. (2014). Theoretical Traditions and Coaching Genres: Mapping the Territory. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 16(2), 139-160.
- Devine, M., Meyers, R., and Houssemand, C. (2013). How can coaching make a positive impact within educational settings? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 93,1382 – 1389. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.10.048.
- Dinos, S., & Palmer, S. (2015). Self-esteem within cognitive behavioural coaching: A theoretical framework to integrate theory and practice. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 8(2),137-153. DOI: 10.1080/17521882.2015.1021823.
- Dobinson-Harrington, A. (2006). Personal tutor encounters: understanding the experience. *Nursing Standard*, 20(5), 35-42. DOI: 10.7748/ns2006.08.20.50.35.c4485.
- Earwaker, J. (1992). *Helping and Supporting Students*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Garvey, R. (2004). The mentoring/counseling/coaching debate. Call a rose by any other name and perhaps it's a bramble? *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 18(2), 6 -8.
- Grant, A. M. (2011). It is time to REGROW the GROW model? Issues related to teaching coaching session structures. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 7(2),118-126.
- Grant, A. M. and Cavanagh, M.J. (2018). Life Coaching. In E. Cox, T. Bachirova and D. Clutterbuck (Eds.), *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* (3rd ed., pp.327- 344), London: Sage
- Grant, A. M., Curtayne, L., & Burton, G. (2009). Executive coaching enhances goal attainment, resilience and workplace well-being: a randomised controlled study. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(5), 396-407. DOI: 10.1080/17439760902992456.
- Green, W., Anderson, V., Tait, K., & Tran, L. T. (2020). Precarity, fear and hope: reflecting and imagining in higher education during a global pandemic. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(7), 1309-1312. DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2020.1826029.
- Hezlett, S. A. and Gibson, S. K. (2007). Linking mentoring and social capital: implications for career and organization development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 9, 384 - 412.
- Jacklin, A and Le Riche, P. (2009) Reconceptualising student support: from 'support' to 'supportive'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(7): 735-749. DOI: 10.1080/03075070802666807.
- Joseph, S. (2018). The person-centred approach to coaching. In E. Cox, T. Bachirova & D. Clutterbuck. (Eds.), *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* (pp. 52-80). Sage: London.
- Lancer, N. and Eatough, V. (2018). One-to-one coaching as a catalyst for personal development: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of coaching undergraduates at a UK university. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 13(1): 72-88.
- Lane, L. G. and Wilde, J.D. (2018). The impact of coaching doctoral students at a university in London. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 16(2), 55-68. DOI: 10.24384/000561.
- Lawton-Smith, C. (2015). How coaching helps leadership resilience: The leadership perspective. *International Coaching Psychology Review*,10(1), pp. 6-19.

- Lochtie, D., McIntosh, E., Stork, A., & Walker, B. W. (2018). *Effective Personal Tutoring in Higher Education*, St Albans: Critical Publishing.
- Neenan, M. & Dryden, W. (2002). , Hove: Routledge.
- Neenan, M. & Palmer, S. (2001). Cognitive Behavioural Coaching. *Stress News*, 13(3), 15 -18
- Owen, M. (2002). 'Sometimes You Feel You're in Niche Time': The Personal Tutor System, a Case Study. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 3(1), 7–23. DOI: [10.1177/1469787402003001002](https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787402003001002).
- Palmer, S. & Szymanska, K. (2007). Cognitive behavioural coaching: An Integrative Approach. In S. Palmer & A. Whybrow (Eds), *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A guide for practitioners*, Hove: Routledge.
- Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21, 95 -103. DOI: [10.1037/0022-006X.60.6.827](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.60.6.827).
- Rogers, C. R. (1963). The actualizing tendency in relation to 'motives' and to consciousness. In M. R. Jones (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation*, 11, 1-24, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Rogers, J. (2016). *Coaching Skills: The Definitive Guide to Being a Coach*. 4th ed. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.
- Saunders, M. N. K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research Methods for Business Students* (8th ed.), Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Stork, A. and Walker, B. (2015). *Becoming an Outstanding Personal Tutor: Supporting Learners through Personal Tutoring and Coaching*. Northwich: Critical Publishing.
- Stott, T., Zaitseva, E. & Cui, V. (2014) Stepping back to move forward? Exploring Outdoor Education students' fresher and graduate identities and their impact on employment destinations. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), 711-733. DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2012.743116](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.743116).
- Thomas, L. (2006). Widening Participation and the Increased Need for Personal Tutoring. In L. Thomas and P. Hixenbaugh (Eds.), *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education* (pp. 21–31), Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books
- Walker, B. W. (2020). Tackling the personal tutoring conundrum: A qualitative study on the impact of developmental support for tutors. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 23(1), 65-77. DOI: [10.1177/1469787420926007](https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787420926007).
- Wang, Q. and Lu, Y. (2020). Coaching college students in the development of positive learning dispositions: A randomized control trial embedded mixed-methods study. *Psychology in Schools*, 57(9), 1417–1438. DOI: [10.1002/pits.22421](https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22421).
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S. and Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). It was nothing to do with the University, a study of the role of social support in student retention. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707–722 DOI: [10.1080/03075070500340036](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070500340036).
- Williams, H., Palmer, S., & Edgerton, N. (2018). Cognitive behavioural coaching. In E. Cox, T. Bachkirova and D. Clutterbuck (Eds.), *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* (3rd ed., pp. 17-34), Sage: London
- Wisker, G., Exley, K., Antoniou, M. and Ridley, P. (2008). *Working one-to-one with students: Supervising, coaching, mentoring, and personal tutoring*. London: Routledge
- Whitmore, J. (2009). *Coaching for performance: GROWing human potential and purpose*, (4th ed.), London: Nicholas Brealey.
- Wooton, S. (2006). Changing Practice in Tutorial Provision within Post-Compulsory Education. In L. Thomas and P. Hixenbaugh (Eds.), *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education* (pp.115–125), Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books
- Yale, A. T. (2019). The personal tutor–student relationship: student expectations and experiences of personal tutoring in higher education, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(4), 533-544. DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2017.1377164](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1377164).

About the authors

Dr. Saquifa Seraj is a senior lecturer at Northumbria University. She holds a MA in Coaching and lead Northumbria's MA Coaching programme for a year.

Ruth Leggett is an experienced coach and coaching supervisor. She is in the teaching team of MSc Coaching and Mentoring programme at Newcastle University.