Coaching for accelerated research productivity in Higher Education

Hilary Geber, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Email: hilary.geber@wits.ac.za

Abstract

It is recognized that combining a thorough orientation to academic life and its expectations with intensive training in conceptualising research can accelerate the careers of early career academics. Unique to the structured support programme for research productivity and publication at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, was ongoing internal coaching of participants. In the study reported here in-depth interviews of participants and coaches were used to collect data. Internal coaches are academics without being experts in the participants' disciplines. Goal alignment linked to both individual and organisational objectives resulted in tangible outcomes for research, publication and career changes. Less tangible outcomes concern the value of coaching; coaching during career or personal critical incidents and the important shifts in thinking which occurred. The outcomes have drawn additional funding to the University, and there is ongoing wider implementation across faculties of the programme with internal coaching.

Keywords: internal coaching; early career academics; structured support; research productivity; publication

Introduction

Coaching is such a buzz word in the world today and is a sought after luxury for executives, senior managers and all sorts of ordinary individuals. Life-coaching is becoming popular in South Africa as well, but universities 'pooh pooh' the idea: surely well-qualified intellectuals don not need 'touch-feely' life coaching to get through a PhD? However, despite having vast amounts of knowledge and intellectual capacity, few academics get their PhDs within the minimum four year time period.

Furthermore, almost half of the permanent staff at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) do not have doctorates and there are even fewer Black academics (African, Indian and Coloured) without doctorates. The number of PhDs in the teaching staff at Wits is low (48% in 2008) and the University wants to increase this number significantly to 70% by 2020. More than 77% of Heads of School, Professors and Associate Professors have PhDs; and 62% of Senior Lecturers hold PhDs. However, at lecturer level the picture is much bleaker: 76% of them do not have PhDs. This means that more than 320 academics without PhDs need to qualify in the next ten years.

Black academics form about 32% of staff at Senior Lecturer and Lecturer levels as a result of previously disadvantageous educational opportunities during Apartheid. But there is also national employment equity legislation and the Wits strategic imperative to increase the number of Black academics to reflect the demographics of the country which is more than 80% Black.

Of the 150 academics currently registered for PhDs, many will attain the qualification within the next five years or so. Annually, over 50 academics with PhDs leave the University and so the backlog does not seem to be redressed. What can Wits do to increase the numbers of academics with doctorates and promote their publication records?

At the University of the Witwatersrand there are no statistics to show how quickly early career academics become productive in publishing journal articles either during their higher degree studies or after the completion of a doctorate. Ollis, Felder and Brent, (2002) maintain that they can get young engineers and mathematicians up and running within one to three years at the beginning of their academic careers. Boice (1992) says that the norm for universities in the USA is usually four to five years. He maintains that early career academics and their managers can do several things to enhance their productivity. Bland, Center, Finstad, Risbey and Staples (2005) show in their model of faculty research productivity that the three main components of a productive research organisation are institutional, individual and leadership which must all be present and accessible for optimal productivity. They show that an individual's research productivity is influenced by a combination of individual characteristics and institutional characteristics and that the importance of research-orientated leaders cannot be underestimated. This is crucial for any research intensive institution to bear in mind while it provides support for individuals, particularly young academics starting their careers. Early career academics may develop all the desirable individual characteristics of highly productive researchers but without institutional support and appropriate leadership, they are likely to be less than optimally productive and it may take many years for them to begin to establish their publication records (Boice, 1992).

Combining a process of intensive orientation to academic life and its expectations with intensive training in conceptualising research can give early career academics a quick start. Several Australian studies have focused on cognitive behaviour therapies to improve PhD completion rates (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008). These and other interventions appear to be effective in overcoming high rates of non-completion. Flinders University has undertaken a longitudinal study of the effects of mentoring on junior female academics (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, 2007), important because longitudinal studies of this sort are rare.

The University of the Witwatersrand approached the development of early career academics by implementing a pilot programme of structured support in 2007. The programme was designed to include various hard and soft skills which would support early career academics in their attainment of higher degrees and in establishing publication of research.

The hard skills training offered included courses on research writing skills; voice and presentation skills; effective speed reading; time and stress management; some IT tools including MindManager; virtual training and writing National Research Foundation funding proposals. The

soft skills support consisted of 12 coaching sessions over a period of eight months with coaches of their choice.

Unique to the programme at Wits was the coaching of the participants when they began the programme. Little is known about the effects of coaching in a structured support programme for early career academics. This article focuses on the coaching aspect of the research support programme. The effectiveness of the hard skills training courses is reported in Geber (2008) and in a forthcoming publication (Geber, in press).

The purpose of the article is to report on a qualitative study into the effects of professional internal coaching for the duration of a structured support programme for research productivity and publication.   The study used the following research questions in the investigation:

- How did coaching as part of a structured programme help early career academics achieve their research goals?
- Is it useful having internal coaches who are not discipline experts?

In depth interviews of participants and coaches after the programme were used to collect data. Some of the current literature on coaching and using internal coaches is reviewed in the following section.

Literature review

Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) in their overview of the practitioner and academic literature on coaching and how it works, review the research on the use of internal coaches in organisations. They argue that in the developmental coaching role, the trained colleague or internal coach's knowledge of the organisation and immediate availability can be beneficial. Internal coaches are now identified and acknowledged by their organisations and Coaching Professional Bodies.

The internal coach has a role that is outside line management, and distinct from the line manager, Head of School Head of Department or Discipline, or higher degree supervisor in higher education institutions. Internal coaching implies that a whole programme of coaching sessions is undertaken and is not restricted to a single informal discussion. The advantage of internal coaching is that the coach can see the person being coached in their academic or research role in the particular Department or School. The internal coach has extensive background information and an understanding and knowledge of the environment and context within which the coachee is working.

Frisch (2001) maintains that internal coaches have the distinct logistical advantage over external coaches in having opportunities for real-world observation. Internal coaches can easily slip into a presentation or meeting, either as part of another role they perform in the organisation or just as an interested colleague. They are in an excellent position later to provide feedback to the person being coached and brainstorm alternatives with concrete knowledge of departmental colleagues and dynamics of the situation. Internal coaches have extensive awareness of organisational culture, academic and publication pressures, frustrations, leadership challenges, and anticipated change, which significantly adds to the immediacy and value of their support.

Frisch (2001) further maintains that the emergence of the internal coach can be seen as a tangible manifestation of the 'learning organisation' described by Senge (1990). Whilst Henderson (2002) reviews the theories of individual transformative learning and comes to the conclusion that transformative learning is a necessary condition for transformational change in organisations. The internal coach who facilitates individual transformative learning aligned with organisational goals performs a critical role in transformational change.

Watt (2004) maintains that the two key elements of coaching are discovery and alignment. Discovery is the stage where coachees have to discover their operating assumptions and beliefs, key to understanding their current behaviour and the hurdles they face to get to the desired place. In the alignment stage, the coach helps coachees to understand their standards, objectives, goals and purpose and align them to those of the organisation, ultimately helping the individual integrate the two operating systems.

Clutterbuck (2008) found that goal alignment defined as 'a general sense of purpose, linked to both individual and organisational broad objectives' is linked better to the relationship experience and participant outcomes than either goal clarity and goal commitment if these are too narrowly focused in the initial stages of the relationship. Goals tend to undergo subtle changes and focus early in the coaching and effective coaches are not held captive by a mechanistic adherence to coachee's first articulation of their goals but allow for thoughtful, organic evolving of goals within the coaching. A key feature of the coaching in the structured support programme at Wits was how it aligned individual goals of higher degree completion and publication of research with the University's long-term staff development strategy.

Methodology

This is a qualitative interpretative study of how effective the coaching process was within the structured support for research success programme at the University of the Witwatersrand and how it facilitated higher degree completion and publication of research. Participants were aware that the programme was part of a research study and a series of questionnaires was used to obtain data before and after the programme. Eight participants were interviewed to provide information about their experience of coaching, their relationships with their coaches, and what outcomes they achieved as a result. The semi-structured interviews were used to obtain intensive, rich, and in-depth data about the relationships as described by Patton (1990), who suggests using few, information-rich cases in order to learn a great deal about concerns central to the purpose of the research.

Training of internal coaches at Wits

Parsloe (1999) defines coaching as a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve. To be successful a coach requires knowledge and understanding of process as well as the variety of styles, skills and techniques that are appropriate to the context in which the coaching takes place.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2007) Coaching Fact sheet defines coaching as developing a person's skills and knowledge so that their job performance

improves, hopefully leading to the achievement of organisational objectives. It targets high performance and improvement at work, although it may also have an impact on an individual's private life. It usually lasts for a short period and focuses on specific skills and goals."

Three permanent staff members were trained in 2006-7 as professional coaches. The Co-active coaching model (Whitworth et al, 2007) was used to train coaches and provide them with a set of tools that can help clients, through a series of questions and accountability agreements, to achieve goals the clients set. The Co-active Coach Training Program curriculum involves 124 hours of intensive face-to-face training with a great deal of practicing with real people and issues.

Sample

Eight academics were selected according to the criteria and invited to attend an initial meeting where they were paired with coaches and advised of the schedule of courses available during the year. They began the programme and the coaching in March 2007.

Although all five Faculties were advised of the programme, the participants were academics in Sciences and Engineering. There were three men and two women from Health Science; two women from Science; and one man from Engineering, all of whom had been employed at Wits for two years or more – see Table 1:

Table 1. Coaching participants by qualification

	Male	Female	Total
PhD completed	1 (White)	1(Indian);1(White)	3
PhD candidate	1(Black)		1
M Sc candidate	2(Coloured)	1(Black); 1(White)	4
Total	4	4	8

Participants were paired with coaches of their choice, offered 12 coaching sessions over a period of eight months, during which most of them spent between 18 and 24 hours in coaching.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Following the coaching process in depth interviews were conducted with participants. They were asked eight questions concerning their expectations of coaches in achieving goals; the most valuable and least valuable aspects of the coaching; the outcome of any critical incidents, either in the career or personal life, on which coaching was requested; important shifts in thinking experienced during the coaching; the fact that the coach was not a discipline expert; and career changes since the coaching.

Findings of coaching process

There was a marked difference in the way the participants with doctorates made use of the coaching sessions. One male participant with a doctorate attended all twelve sessions and the two women participants with doctorates attended half of the sessions on offer. Four of the five participants registered for higher degrees made use of all twelve sessions and requested several additional sessions for various reasons. It is clear that they felt the need for much more support in

completing their studies and more support in getting to grips with the academic discourse of their disciplines.

In detailing their coaching expectations and the effectiveness and value of the coaching, the participants highlighted aspects of self –discovery and alignment (Watt, 2004; Clutterbuck, 2007) which they experienced in the coaching. Some participants requested coaching on a critical incident in their careers or personal lives, and most had career changes after the coaching. All participants made important shifts in thinking during the coaching despite the internal coaches not being experts in the participants' academic disciplines.

Expectations of the coach in achieving goals

The participants had not experienced individual coaching before and had no idea of what to expect or what would be expected from them. Some of those with doctorates were clearer about what to expect, as one participant said:

> *I'd just finished writing up the PhD and I was feeling quite 'whacked'. So one of the things I wanted to accomplish was to find a balance between my work and home life because I was just finding the one was totally overwhelming the other - that happens with a PhD.*

Because coaching is a fairly new concept in South Africa and certainly a new and unusual activity for academics at Wits, some participants had very low expectations of the process. One man had this to say about his expectations:

> *… absolutely none. I only endured the coaching, or was willing to go through the coaching process because it was compulsory as part of the course. So my expectations were that it was going to be a waste of time and that it was probably going to involved a lot of hard work on my part, in terms of trying to pretend that I was enjoying it or getting something out of it, so my expectations were low.*

Despite the fact that participants began their coaching with little knowledge of what to expect from the process, most had their expectations met and often exceeded.

The effectiveness of coaching during the programme

Without exception all participants said that their coaches were instrumental in helping them achieve their goals. The process of goal setting and goal alignment with coaches, and their support in the achievement of the goals was a primary intention of the coaching. Their tangible outputs are good, even dramatic in one case of a PhD candidate who submitted six articles for publication in the year. One woman with a doctorate felt that she is able to function independently now:

> *I feel more confident as a lecturer and have realised that I can function effectively as an independent researcher too. The latter was one of the key goals that I wanted to achieve in the programme.*

Four of the five registered for Masters degrees made use of all twelve sessions and requested several additional sessions for various reasons. It is clear that they felt the need for much more support in getting to grips with their research and the academic discourse of their disciplines.

> *My coach was helpful in getting me to keep the momentum going when it seemed to keep stalling.*

Although coaching was specifically included to enable participants to achieve research goals it had much wider effects than that. Participants used the coaching as a personal development space to explore areas directly linked to the research and writing process, they also explored areas beyond work/life balance, interpersonal skills, communication, assertiveness and dealing with criticism, departmental politics etc.

> *With the help from my coach I now have a better relationship with my supervisor who is also my colleague and this created a much healthier working environment. Also thanks to my coach I now have a good relationship with my sister and as a result I have less stress.*

Coaches helped participants to negotiate access to and a credible position in the academic departments. They all mention how much coaching helped with colleagues, departmental heads, and students. Coaches who are familiar with the Higher Education discourse are able to weave the strands of the core courses together in such a way that participants could create a masterful and creative design for each project that they became involved in.

The most valuable aspects of the coaching

In detailing the value of coaching, the participants highlighted aspects the coaching process itself and their own journeys of self-discovery. They talked about the value of having a neutral environment with an unbiased listener; regular meetings and coaches tracking their progress; space to talk about subjects 'taboo' at work; the freedom to acknowledge their vulnerability; and the coaches' helpfulness, resourcefulness, exploring of options with them and giving them concrete feedback.

Most participants were surprised and pleased with the coaching process and with the ability of the coaches to provide a safe place for them to explore personal and work issues and to be a sounding board for possible courses of action. One participant expressed his experience of the coaching process like this:

> *It was an eye-opener. It was a very valuable experience and probably the greatest value, is having someone who is unbiased. In terms of your interaction with the coach, there's a complete lack of bias. My expectations of the coaching, my coach, were extremely low or non-existent and then because it's a neutral environment, you can say things or admit to things or, I suppose, enunciate ideas or fears or whatever, which you wouldn't be able to do in another environment.*

The participants liked the regular meetings, the coaches' interest in their progress and well-being and the guidance they offered. They valued getting feedback on their actions and the accountability for acting on their goals.

It often comes as a shock for early career academics to realise just how isolated they are at work and how few people there are to discuss work or personal issues with. There is often a huge divide between their group of working colleagues and their friends and family, so early career academics are grateful for a coach who can look at them holistically and help them to deal with their sense of aloneness and being a newcomer at work. One participant said this about her coach as a listener:

> *I think one of the things that stood out, was I realised that, as a female researcher here, a lot of us have the same problems because you have this idea that you're all alone and you're going through these things all on your own. During the sessions, a lot of things came up and my coach just made me realise that I'm not alone. Everybody's in pretty much the same boat. I think that was one of the really important things that came through. Very soon I realised I can't do that on my own.*

Increasing self-awareness was another feature of the coaching which made a marked impression on the participants. Coaching not only provided a neutral space but a safe space in which to talk about subjects which are seldom discussed at work and which are regarded as inappropriate or 'taboo'. They could share feelings of isolation and feeling stuck and unable to find a way out. One participant expressed this relief when she said:

> In the coaching, there was someone there for me, that I could talk to about things that I actually never thought I could talk to someone about, that I thought were not important to talk about. I valued the ear that my coach gave me. In the work situation, because I had personal clashes or differences with my supervisor, which I never spoke to anyone about and I wasn't actually aware, in a way, that it was bothering me, until I spoke about it with her.

Sometimes self-awareness is triggered by a critical incident and then the value of having a coach to share it with is invaluable.

Critical incidents in the career

Half of the participants said that they had experienced a critical incident during the coaching and most of those were work related. The incidents concerned relationships at work with managers, supervisors and with students. Some had personal incidents including traumatic life events which they discussed with their coaches but these, profound as they were, will not be discussed here.

Early career academics sometimes find it difficult to confront senior academics who are their supervisors about lack of input or continuity during the supervision process. This may be more common with women early career academics than men particularly if women feel that they do not have the right to ask for supervision time from their busy supervisors.

There was a point where both my supervisors really had stalled on my process. I couldn't get any feedback from them. I couldn't move any further along and it was very disheartening actually... Basically I was stuck and she said, "No, look, you have to be more assertive, you have to be a little bit more pushy." That was where the self-esteem and the affirmations came in, and she said: "Just keep contacting them." And we even thought of all kinds of options, shall I telephone, shall I bake a cake, shall I... We tried everything actually and, in the end, it certainly did move it further forward, so it was a good thing. I kept on bugging them, nagging them.

Helping early career academics become more assertive with colleagues and senior academics not only helps with them to complete higher degrees but it cuts down on individual frustration and keeps morale up. It increases the through-put rate of post-graduates for the University and the government funding which results. Academics at Wits are offered a graduation bonus to start their research funding but this does not seem to have affected the throughput rate very much. In addition, once the degree is completed, publications from the research can be also be used to create a publication record for the individual and gain further funding for the School or Faculty and the University from the Department of Education. The University's research incentive scheme also benefits academics who publish by giving them a percentage of the government funds to use for their own research.

Dealing with supervisors and senior colleagues can be difficult and so can dealing with supervising students. Many first time supervisors do not feel comfortable with the process and are unsure of what to do or how to behave when things get tricky. One novice supervisor had this to say about his learning through the coaching:

The start of the programme coincided with me getting my first masters student and during the course of the coaching, I felt that my masters student was losing interest or was completely lacking in motivation but that I just wasn't getting through to her or that she wasn't particularly happy and wasn't telling me so. I think we managed to work through that in the coaching. Well, I like to think that my master's student is a lot happier now and that we have a better relationship. I think, this being my first student, I might have been a bit hypersensitive and the coaching helped. I'm far more relaxed and far more willing to recognise that people have different ways of doing things and, understanding my role as a supervisor.

Although the university does offer supervisors some training in the supervision process, not all novice supervisors attend the training and there is no provision for their additional support when they feel frustrated or simply do not know how to handle particular students. Even novice supervisors are well aware of the power relations involved in supervision. The coaching of academics who are supervisors can not only help them to discover their learning style, but their management style and interpersonal style with post graduate students. In this case, coaching the participant concurrent with supervision prevented the student from dropping out or slowing down, and indirectly contributed to a better experience for her in the supervision.

Coping with negative feedback from others and with critical incidents triggers the process of self-discovery which participants can then articulate, think about and ponder with their coaches before making decisions about how to align the experiences positively with their personal goals, academic goals and the organisational goals (Clutterbuck, 2007). Thinking about these things

brings about shifts in perspectives about self and others which can have far-reaching implications for academics in their lives and careers.

Important shifts in thinking experienced during the coaching

As a result of the self-discovery experienced by the participants, many realised that their thinking about themselves had changed in ways that they could not have foreseen. The most frequent comments from participants about shifts in thinking concerned boundary issues and balancing demands, assertiveness, personal responsibility, and asking for help.

Setting boundaries and balancing career demands are some of the most difficult tasks facing early career academics. They seldom get advice or guidance from their colleagues or Heads of Departments unless they ask for it, and sink or swim as best they can. They are eager to be accepted by their colleagues and are often not clear about how or where to demarcate their limits. One participant expressed the dilemma of many early career academics and shows an important shift in thinking about himself:

> *… it's ok to be selfish because, I think, one of the hardest things, for someone who's going from a PhD to post-PhD, is basically just forging your own career. In the PhD, you tend to do, take on a lot more, than I was probably capable of at the time. You don't want to let people down, so you tend not to say no and then afterwards, the demands on your time are so great and you're trying to balance several things which are: getting funding for your own research; output of your own research; and also, trying to manage students which takes up a lot of time; and administration. You just don't have the time and you need to be able to say, "Look, this is what I can do and I'm not going to take on these extra projects, even if I think they are really interesting." So you learn to be selfish, without being rude or unpleasant, but you have to be able to set boundaries, otherwise you can sink quite quickly.*

In addition to boundary setting and juggling competing demands in their careers, early career academics found that the coaches help them to change their perceptions of their responsibility to themselves in the crucial area of writing for publication. So many of them are overwhelmed by other aspects of their jobs that even if they do some research, they tend to delay writing for various other reasons as well (Badenhorst, 2007). The coaches helped to reinforce the habits which participants learned on the research writing skills course in the programme and to take their thinking about academic writing to another level by emphasising how much of a personal responsibility it is.

The number of journal articles which the participants produced by the end of the coaching shows the advantage of being coached through the personal blocks which arise during the writing process. Coaches are aware that prolific writers engage in consistent, persistent daily writing, in small bite-sized chunks, as well as for extended periods. They are also aware that less productive writers tend to engage in long fallow periods of zero productivity, interspersed with frenzied spurts of "binge writing" (Badenhorst, 2007; Bland et al., 2005; Boice, 1989). Coaches who understand writing techniques, dealing with writer's blocks, procrastination, getting appropriate feedback on written drafts and coping with reviewers' comments can be very helpful to early career academics.

Non-specific discipline expertise in the coaches

There was a very favourable response to internal coaches who were experts in disciplines other than participants' own. Internal coaches know about the writing of research, the pressure to publish and the lengthy nature of the publication process, so discipline expertise is not really an issue. That kind of subject expertise can be found in colleagues in the department, research supervisors and also from mentors. Coaches gave a different perspective on the participants' work, working style and for those with doctorates, coaches supported their learning to be independent from previous PhD supervisors. For the doctoral candidate, the coach provided generic guidance about the research process, getting past obstacles and doing things to get going in the writing process. One candidate took some of his follow-up actions on the coach's suggestions to his supervisor and was applauded for his lateral thinking.

The participants considered that the coaches' knowledge of the academic discourse was more important than specific subject knowledge. One participant expressed the general feeling this way:

> *I don't think it was much of an issue. I mean, she's an academic who writes papers and whether you do it in arts or in science, it doesn't really matter. The process and the things that you run into in this University are going to be the same, whichever department you come from. The help was more getting it done and I think that doesn't matter which department the coach is from.*

Fillery-Davis and Lane (2006) have acknowledged the importance of the coaches' availability and discourse knowledge. The participants in this study certainly found that advantageous and liberating. One man expressed his delight when he said:

> *I think I enjoyed that most of all. I think there was a different perspective. I enjoyed the idea that the coach was not medically trained very, very much. I found that her questions and the insight were really incredible.*

Outcomes of the Programme

Self report on the effectiveness of the coaching is important in qualitative research but more quantitative data can reinforce the findings. Indeed one way of evaluating the effectiveness of the programme is to look at the tangible outcomes at the end of the programme and these are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Tangible outputs from the structured support for research success programme

	Women	Men	Total
Papers accepted for publication			
International		2(W)	**2**
National	1(I)	7(A, W)	**8**
Papers under review	3 (I, W)	1(W)	**4**
MSc completed	1(A)		**1**
Promotion	1(I)	2 (C, W)	**3**
Conference presentations			
Conference presentations- National		1 (C)	**1**
Conference presentations -International	2 (I, A)	2 (A, C)	**4**
Conference presentations prize-International	1 (I)		**1**
NRF Rating		1 (W)	**1**
Grant funding			
NRF grant funding - National	1 (I)	1 (W)	**2**
Grant funding - International		3 (W)	**3**

The table shows that most of the tangible outcomes are fairly evenly distributed between men and women except in the case of articles accepted for publication in national journals, the majority of which (six of the seven) were produced by one male doctoral participant in Engineering. The publication of papers is a requirement of his doctorate whereas this is not the case with any other participants, although some women also produced articles from their higher degree studies.

In terms of race, the most prolific publishers in this study were African and Indian academics. Demographically, White academics at Wits outnumber Black (African, Indian, Coloured) academics quite significantly: there were 72% White and 28% Black academics at Wits in 2007. Prolific publication by Black academics is an unexpected outcome, especially since White academics published more articles per head than Black academics between 2000 and 2007 (MIU, 2009). Black engineers show low publication rates in this period, so this finding is exceptional, not only for the Faculty of Engineering but for all Faculties. The participant attributes his prolific output directly to the support from his coach:

> *I normally have average of three publications in a year. Last year, I have six and I achieved it through the coaching.*

Men also applied for and gained more grant funding than the women did. This may be because fewer women applied for grants than men.

The tangible outcomes and other changes experienced by the participants contributed to changes in their careers. Their publication records were established, and three were promoted. Several have been awarded substantial grant funding. Many participants also felt affirmed and more able to work comfortably and enjoyably with themselves and their colleagues. One shy participant explained the changes in her career like this:

> *I became aware of my capabilities because maybe I had low self-esteem, so I became aware that I can actually do things on my own. Even when I went back to work, after several coaching sessions, actually people were coming to me and saying, "We can see a*

*difference. It is actually working". Now that I've gotten the master's my colleagues also
have confidence in me. As a result, I'm getting more responsibilities which is a good
thing to me.*

Thus it seems that coaching during the structured support programme has far reaching
effects, both tangible and intangible.

Discussion and Conclusion

The explicit message of the Wits 'Research Success and Structured Support' programme
is that research and publication are crucial and the University is willing to provide extensive
resources to assist young academics in achieving significant research outputs early in their
careers. Bland et al. (2005) point out that this is a key factor in research productivity. The
coaching was crucial to the success of the programme because coaches are able to weave the
strands of the core courses together in such a way that participants made important discoveries
about themselves and then aligned that knowledge with the goals they set and the University's
research goals. Coaching is the process which is instrumental in making the whole programme
much more effective than just the sum of the parts.

The findings of this research study show three important outcomes of the coaching.
Firstly, that participants were able to manage interpersonal processes in a much more proactive
way than they had before the programme. Secondly, that the critical incidents which they
experience triggered intense self-discovery. Thirdly, as a result of significant shifts in thinking
about themselves, participants were able to align their self-awareness with their goals and the
overall organisational research agenda.

In the neutral coaching environment with the internal coach as an unbiased listener, and
through regular coaching sessions over the period of eight months, the participants discovered a
safe space to talk about their work, their careers, their goals for the programme and much more.
They found the career support invaluable but they also found the coaching helped them become
much more aware of personal issues. They found that they could talk honestly about their feelings
of vulnerability, inability to cope with interpersonal conflict and subjects which they would never
broach with colleagues because they regard them as inappropriate or taboo in the work context.
The confidentiality of the coaching facilitated the process of self-discovery and the coaches'
helpfulness and resourcefulness ensured that they could confront personal issues and get feedback
in a supportive environment. This meant that they could plan for personal change and
transformation and take risks without fear of being judged by their peers or superiors.

Several participants found that they experienced a critical incident during the programme
which they discussed with their coaches. Most critical incidents required participants to display
courage in coping with them and they were able to do so because of the support of the coach. It
required courage for them to examine themselves and courage to confront others and to decide
what they really want to do.

Internal coaching facilitated significant shifts in thinking for the participants. They
realised that they had changed views of themselves as academics and as people at the end of the
coaching. They reported that they had become aware of, and resolved boundary issues with

colleagues, supervisors and students. They also gained awareness of their personal responsibility in being assertive, balancing career and family demands, and asking colleagues for help.

These less tangible achievements are more difficult to assess. In their self-report participants indicate that they have made huge strides in their personal, interpersonal and communication skills. The less successful reported that difficulties in achieving their goals were attributable to lack of personal skills in dealing with criticism, interpersonal conflict, time management, and lack of assertiveness. They resolved difficulties primarily through discussion with their coaches. It is clear that coaching is important in tackling these issues quickly and effectively.

What are the implications for the University in terms of investment in early career academics? Is the University able to calculate its return on investment in this programme? The cost of training the coaches was fairly high both financially and in terms of the amount of time which coaches had to invest in their training. They spent 15 days in training over the course of six months and the University paid for their training. This was an investment of ZAR 150.000 (South African Rand). The hard skills training courses in the programme were delivered by external trainers and cost ZAR 120.000 for all the participants. The coaching sessions for participants were not costed in terms of payment because the internal coaches had agreed to coach the participants in the programme without charge as repayment to the University for their training. Nevertheless, the coaches gave about a hundred hours of their time to the participants over the course of the programme.

The University would have recovered its investment of time and money through the DoE funding which it receives as a result of the journal articles which the participants had published in accredited journals. Within the year the participants had earned ZAR 1 800 000 from their publications. They would have earned an additional ZAR 400 000 when their papers under review were published. The total amount in their earnings is about three times the initial investment in their training by Wits. But not only is there a significant ROI in monetary terms but there is also a return through the retention of early career academics, their high morale and their increased ability to develop productive relationships with their senior colleagues, peers and students. They may also be instrumental in decreasing the drop-out rate of postgraduate students because they had learnt to supervise them more effectively during the coaching. So the tangible outputs have percolated down to the bottom-line in terms of a quantifiable performance measure for the organisation.

It appears then, that support is crucial for early career academics to accelerate productivity at the beginning of their careers and internal coaching refines and enhances that support.

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Dr Hilary Geber is an Industrial Psychologist specializing in academic staff development and mentoring at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She has published widely internationally and has researched mentoring at Trinity College, Dublin with the Women in Science and Engineering Research.