



Black Students' Experiences of Coaching and Mentoring in Higher Education: A Case Study

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education</i>
Manuscript ID	IJMCE-01-2023-0011.R3
Manuscript Type:	Practitioner Paper
Keywords:	coaching, Distance learning, HE student tuition, Higher education, mentoring, Mentoring and coaching in HE

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Abstract

Purpose

In this case study, we offer an analysis of feedback from a student experience survey completed by Black undergraduate students who received proactive, targeted coaching and mentoring support during 2021 to 2022. All the students were studying at a large higher education institution in the United Kingdom which offers a broad range of degree courses by distance learning.

Approach

This paper reports on the intervention delivered and analyses the student experience of being offered, and receiving, proactive coaching and mentoring. It is based on the responses of 102 students who engaged with the experience survey after having self-selected to receive the intervention. What follows is an analysis of their experiences using a qualitative in vivo approach based on word frequency in students' free-text comments.

Findings

The findings presented are that, in this intervention, students who self-select to receive coaching and mentoring support experience tangible (self-reported) behaviour changes with potentially longer term benefits for their studies. These include improved self-confidence and self-efficacy, increased proactive help-seeking behaviour, greater recognition of strengths and achievement, and personal growth and self-awareness.

Originality

In presenting this case study, we aim to contribute to the growing corpus of practitioner case studies and research papers that show the benefits of coaching and mentoring in higher education and – more specifically - why coaching and mentoring can be a worthwhile targeted intervention for students from underrepresented backgrounds. This lends support to the growing consensus that students with positive, proactive help-seeking behaviours perform better than students not able to access support (Byrne *et al.*, 2014). We conclude the case study with some practical implications for providers looking to provide targeted support to students.

Keywords

higher education, coaching, mentoring, distance learning, widening participation, Black students, underrepresented students, help-seeking behaviours, soft skills, sense of belonging

Introduction: the coaching and mentoring intervention

Coaching and mentoring are techniques increasingly used in a range of student support interventions in higher education institutions (HEIs). Mentoring has long been recognised as an effective form of support for undergraduates, encompassing a range of relationships – from faculty–student mentoring, peer-assisted study mentoring, and reverse mentoring to formalised schemes involving trained advisors and mentors (Lunsford *et al.*, 2017). Until recently, coaching as a mechanism of support has been more typical in the North American context, where there is a strong corpus of evidence for coaching and academic coaching in US community colleges (Barkley, 2011). There is now a much wider recognition of the value of both academic and holistic coaching interventions. This includes coaching for undergraduate students (Fried and Irwin, 2016; Lancer, 2020; Lancer and Eatough, 2018) and postgraduate students (Grant, 2003), including students with disabilities (Bellman *et al.*, 2015) and students from other underrepresented cohorts (Spencer, 2021).

In this case study, we report on an intervention which uses both coaching and mentoring techniques to support student success and where coaching and mentoring are part of the same continuum of dialogic support (Passmore *et al.*, 2013). Whilst the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC, 2023) defines mentoring as a ‘learning relationship’ based on dialogue, it is important to note the wider consensus that mentoring relationships are ‘asymmetrical’ because of the assumed knowledge and experience of the mentor (Eby *et al.*, 2007, p.10). As others have observed (Passmore and Sinclair, 2020, p. 10), the amount of practitioner ‘input’ in terms of advice and/or guidance decreases as practitioners move along the continuum towards coaching. In the context of this intervention, this allows practitioners to move fluidly between coaching and mentoring techniques to deliver support which is responsive and adaptive to student knowledge, needs and circumstances. Unlike most IAG (information, advice and guidance) provision, which tends to be standard provision in higher education (HE) student services, coaching and mentoring allows practitioners to move between ‘listening and telling’ (Hughes, 2009, p. 138). This helps to position students as ‘experts’ in their own lives, where the coach–mentor acts as a non-directive facilitator supporting independent problem-solving and solution-finding, where possible. The fluid, flexible nature of the coaching and mentoring support provided is reflected in the way students refer variously to ‘coaches’ and ‘mentors’, as well as other shorthand depending on how they have individually contracted with the practitioner. In this case study, we use the term *coach/mentor* to signify this helping relationship.

The support model is based on the provision of repeat, one-to-one virtual and/or telephone appointments for distance-learning students by a trained member of staff. All the students who receive the offer of coaching and mentoring are from cohorts currently underrepresented in HE, such as students with disabilities or mental health needs, or from particular ethnic and/or socio-economic backgrounds and who are also considered ‘at risk’ of poorer outcomes in their studies. In this case study, we analyse the experiences of Black students who received support in the 2021–2022 academic

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3 year. In sharing insights into Black students' experiences of coaching and mentoring, we seek to
4 contribute to the growing body of scholarship looking at coaching and mentoring support for 'non-
5 traditional' students in HE by scholars of coaching such as Spencer (2021) and comparable studies
6 exploring the impact of coaching on retention (Thomas and Hanson, 2014), as well as career coaching
7 and mentoring programmes (Jones and Smith, 2022).
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11 Coaching and mentoring students through this 'equity lens' (Clay *et al.*, 2023) requires a person-
12 centred and student-led approach, which allows a more holistic approach to supporting distance-
13 learning students in the contexts of their lives and their wider professional and socio-cultural
14 identities. Importantly, as we have noted, it is also non-directive where possible in the sense that it
15 allows students to set the agenda for their conversations, and coach/mentors strive to create a space
16 which values, and centres, the lived experiences of students. Practically, this means that students
17 identify and set goals, and the coaching/mentoring relationship is based on a reciprocal, mutual
18 exploration of ways to achieve these.
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24 25 **Student cohort**

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27 Interventions in HE which target a particular cohort or demographic are often linked to access and
28 participation plans: a regulatory requirement for HEIs in England (Office for Students, 2023). Access
29 and participation plans set out how an institution will address inequities for students – usually across a
30 four- or five-year cycle. More specifically, they outline how institutions will combat equality of
31 opportunity in terms of access to HE, degree or qualification results, and progression to graduate
32 careers. Ethnicity awarding gaps – or the difference in proportions of students from racially
33 minoritised backgrounds being awarded degrees comparable to White students – continue to be a
34 challenge for many providers. In this context, targeted interventions for those students are recognised
35 as one possible approach to addressing institutional awarding gaps – although with mixed experiences
36 from students (Stevenson, 2012). Like the coaching and mentoring offer that we focus on in this case
37 study, targeted interventions are usually designed to address broader systemic issues and institutional
38 barriers to equity.
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47 In this case study, we report on an intervention where the support offer was made with an explicit
48 acknowledgement to students that there are significant systemic and societal barriers to Black
49 students' success at university – with or without intersecting disadvantages such as mental health or
50 disability. This helped to mitigate against the risk of perpetuating the more traditional 'skills-deficit'
51 approach to targeted interventions in HE. What is also crucial is that the first filter for selecting
52 eligible students were indicators of 'risk', not ethnicity. Students were identified as those with a
53 module pass probability prediction of 70% or less – itself based on an algorithm including previous
54 educational qualifications, grades achieved in prior semesters, disability and/or mental health needs
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3 and a host of approximately 65 other factors. This is a pre-existing, widely used institutional tool
4 which helps to identify students who may require proactive support.
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7 **The intervention**

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9 We offered up to six one-to-one coaching and mentoring appointments over a nine-month period to
10 these eligible students based on a transparent positioning statement about the institutional strategic
11 agenda and the regulatory requirements (Office for Students, 2018). We sought to enhance the offer
12 with the development of guidance for reasonable adjustments protocols and a video calls pilot which
13 allowed the service to support more students with disabilities and access requirements. Of the eligible
14 cohort, 557 students (24.2%) responded positively to the offer, and 312 (13.5%) went on to have at
15 least one coaching and mentoring appointment between September 2021 and August 2022.
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18 Telephone and video coaching and mentoring calls were up to 45 minutes in duration, with the
19 possibility of shorter, more regular calls where students were unable to attend full sessions due to a
20 disability. Following an initial chemistry or contracting call focused on confidentiality, coach/mentors
21 used a diagnostic 'snapshot' questionnaire to help students to identify their goals and agree a focus for
22 their appointments. All the practitioners were employed on academic-related (not faculty) contracts in
23 student support services and had either a coaching or related (counselling, careers guidance, teaching)
24 qualification. Practitioners engaged with a combination of peer and external coaching supervision
25 throughout the intervention.
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28 **Methodology: student experience survey**

29 Students who received coaching and mentoring support were issued with an optional online student
30 experience survey after the intervention had concluded. Students were advised that their participation
31 was voluntary and that responses would be anonymised at the reporting stage. The online survey was
32 distributed by email and was completed by 102 respondents in a three-month window; this represents
33 a response rate of 27% of the cohort who received coaching and mentoring. The survey was designed
34 with a combination of open-ended and scaling questions on a Likert scale. As the survey focused on
35 eliciting responses about experiential learning from students, all questions were intended to prompt
36 student reflection (Braun *et al.*, 2020). The survey was therefore intended both as an opportunity to
37 offer feedback on the intervention but also as a moment for reflective observation on what had been
38 felt and experienced during the intervention (Kolb, 1984). The feedback form received a retrospective
39 favourable ethics approval by the institution (Ethics: HREC/4577/Hillman: HREC Favourable
40 Opinion 18/12/22).
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43 **Scaling questions**

44 The scaling questions (Table 1) focused on the subjective experiences, as well as operational
45 questions around service communications and overall satisfaction. Students were asked to select from
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pre-determined options in response to these – from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. As the results show (Table 1), the student respondents described positive experiences in relation to all areas.

Table 1. Summary of student responses to Likert-scale questions

In person-centred ‘helping’ relationships which include coaching and mentoring, the Rogerian principles of ‘unconditional positive regard’ apply (Rogers, 1967). This positions the practitioner as unconditionally accepting of the person they support, without judgement or agenda (Rogers, 1967, p. 53). It was therefore important to evaluate the coach/mentor–student dynamic from the student perspective. Questions focused on exploring whether students felt enabled to direct the focus of their coaching and mentoring appointments, their sense of safety and trust in the intervention, and their perceptions of their relationship with the coach/mentor. The importance of a ‘sense of safety’ in coaching for students has been noted elsewhere (van Nieuwerburgh & Love, 2019, cited in Spencer, 2021, p. 92). The student respondents were unanimous (100%) in recognising their agency in setting the agenda for sessions. Students also mostly (98%) experienced the empathy and support of their coach/mentor.

Open-ended questions

To encourage further reflection and capture experiences as described in the students’ ‘language and terminology’ (Braun *et al.*, 2020, p. 641), the survey also asked three open, free-text questions: (i) ‘Please tell us (in your own words) about the difference that working with your coach/mentor has made to your personal growth and development’ (ii) ‘Your suggestions for the further development or improvement of the service are ...’ and (iii) ‘Please take this opportunity to expand on any of your answers. You might like to share with us your experience of the service, or of completing this feedback questionnaire.’ In response to (ii), many students simply requested an increase to the number of coaching and mentoring appointments available to them. Some students observed that the offer would ideally be made earlier in the student journey and that efforts should be made to raise awareness of the support. As most of these suggestions were related to practical, logistical aspects of the service’s operations, in this case study, we focused on student free-text comments in response to (i) and (ii). These free-text comments were analysed using *in vivo* coding to establish key themes and word frequency to establish how students described their experiences.

Feedback analysis and key themes

The challenges of creating a sense of belonging for Black students in HE is now a familiar theme in the widening access and participation literature (Read *et al.*, 2003; Russell and Jarvis, 2019) and remains an ongoing challenge for most HEIs. The scholarly literature demonstrates that students from underrepresented backgrounds more generally, but particularly those from racially minoritised groups, experience barriers at university and ‘adverse experiences’ with regard to ‘access to help, supervision

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3 and support' (Arday, 2018). A lack of belonging for students from underrepresented groups is,
4 arguably, compounded by distance learning which can make connection to the institution more
5 difficult to foster. This was reflected in the student experience survey which followed this
6 intervention. Mitigating against this, however, was the presence of a coach/mentor who provided an
7 anchoring point of connection with the university. Students described their coach/mentor as the 'link'
8 or someone who was 'there' who could 'share' and 'listen'.
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13 Having [a coach/mentor] has helped to steady me at times when I have felt overwhelmed. It has
14 been very helpful having someone to talk to about study that is involved with the [university].
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17 Personally, it is one of the things I enjoy with the university as we do most of our study alone
18 so for me having someone to share my experience with is priceless.
19
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21 This sense of advocacy from the coach/mentor was, indeed, the strongest theme in the student
22 feedback. Students described feeling variously 'boosted', 'cheered on' and 'championed', and almost
23 one-third of all free-text comments used the word 'encourage' or variations of it directly. What is also
24 notable is that respondents described this advocacy as underpinning other key significant
25 enhancements to their experience at university (Figure 1).
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30 Figure 1. Illustration of key themes in student experiences of coaching and mentoring
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32 In other words, students identified the sense of encouragement they perceived from their
33 coach/mentor as prompting other positive experiences and/or behaviour change. As Figure 1
34 demonstrates, these tended to be self-reported changes in feelings or behaviour. Let us now turn to
35 explore these.
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38 ***Confidence and self-efficacy***

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40 The literature on awarding gaps for 'widening access' students has revealed notable differences in
41 student confidence and self-efficacy (Southall *et al.*, 2016). More recent studies of confidence among
42 Black students and students from other minority ethnic backgrounds have found correlation between
43 self-belief in ability to succeed and four key sources of self-efficacy which include: mastery
44 experiences – where a student can draw upon previous experience of completing a task or overcoming
45 challenge; vicarious experiences – where a student sees other student success from their peer group;
46 verbal persuasion – where their abilities are verbally articulated by another person connected to their
47 studies; and emotional state – where a student enjoys the experience of studying and feels connected
48 to the course and institution (Reilly *et al.*, 2021). Implicit references in the student feedback to at least
49 three of these four sources of self-efficacy demonstrate the ways in which the intervention contributed
50 to increased levels of confidence among the Black students the service supported. In this way, this
51 evaluation mirrors patterns in other UK-based studies (Thomas and Hanson, 2014, p. 66).
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3 First, coach/mentors helped students to identify how to apply learning from previous experiences to
4 build self-confidence ('mastery experiences'). In some cases, students shared how their coach/mentor
5 helped them to recognise how they had been able to overcome challenges and manage workload
6 issues, which had – in turn – generated more self-confidence.
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10 Working with [my coach/mentor] helped me to understand what i [sic] needed to do in my
11 assignments. Helped me understand my thought process. Had more confidence in my writing,
12 in understanding how I work through any issues that I have had. Also felt that I was not as
13 behind as I thought. The process of assignments became easier, had more of a plan. A lot less
14 confusion and doubt.
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19 This student's self-reported growth in confidence points to the value of a person-centred approach to
20 supporting underrepresented students, where the coach/mentor takes a Rogerian approach to
21 highlighting their potential and expertise (Wosket, 2003). Similarly, other students reflected on how
22 their coach had helped them to apply learning from previous experiences:
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25 Working with the [coach/mentor] came at an important time for me. I was going through a
26 terrible period as I had failed my first 2 tmas [tutor marked assessments]. Speaking with the
27 [coach/mentor] gave me the opportunity to voice my frustration and to come up with solutions.
28 Thankfully this helped me to pass my 3rd tma and gave me some confidence leading towards
29 the final ema [end of module assessment]. I think this is an important service as it provides a
30 voice, that link between the student and online learning which can be a lonely place!
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36 In this example, it is apparent that the student felt ownership of their ability to problem-solve or
37 'come up with solutions' themselves which, in turn, gave them confidence for their assessments.

38 Second, students referenced the value of having a coach/mentor to remind them of their abilities,
39 which helped to instil confidence (the 'verbal persuasion' source of self-efficacy):
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43 My [coach/mentor] has encouraged and believes in me, which has boosted my confidence.
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46 [My coach/mentor] has contributed a great deal throughout my personal development and help
47 me reach my full potential. I have learnt the benefits of believing in myself more and how it's
48 okay to open up to challenges and [my coach/mentor] has supported me with this and I feel so
49 much more confident. I feel better equipped when talking through any difficulties or challenges
50 going forward all thanks to the team so many thanks.
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55 Third, students shared the positive impact the coaching and mentoring had on their feelings about
56 their module and/or their ability to succeed (the 'emotional state' source of self-efficacy). In some
57 cases, this was in relation to recognising the validity of their own approach to study in their subject
58 area and the pace of their work:
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3 Work with my [coach/mentor] has given me confidence in knowing I can definitely achieve
4 even at a slower pace. My [coach/mentor] was very encouraging whilst advising me to stay on
5 the course and advise about tools to help me progress with my learning.
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9 It has encouraged me to be more confident in the field I am studying and provided immense
10 support with any enquiries I had.
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13 In other cases, students described a more general impact on their feelings about OU study:

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15 Working with the [coach/mentor] has helped me improve my time management, being able to
16 divide my time between my study commitments, work and family. These sessions have allowed
17 me to recognise the power of self-reflection and was encouraged to celebrate any achievements
18 however small. In general I have been able to challenge old routines and have become a more
19 confident person/learner.
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24 I gained massive confidence in talking to someone and shared with them the opinion I had and
25 they in turn demonstrated to me the everything I said count! I felt very much valued and
26 couldn't be much more appreciative! I had wonderful experience and could recommend the
27 service to anyone!
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31 That increased confidence and self-efficacy is directly linked to lower attrition rates and improved
32 student outcomes feels both intuitive and logical; it is also confirmed by empirical studies in the
33 literature (Jungert and Rosander, 2010). The potential for these positive changes in student self-
34 confidence and self-efficacy to contribute to positive and equitable outcomes for underrepresented
35 students therefore seems an important theme in the feedback. The introduction of group coaching and
36 mentoring activities for particular peer groups (Black students and students with mental health needs)
37 in the subsequent academic year will also be an opportunity for students to experience the fourth
38 source of self-efficacy by witnessing the successes of peers with shared lived experiences ('vicarious'
39 experience).
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46 ***Proactive help-seeking***

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48 There is now a consensus in the literature on HE that students with positive, proactive help-seeking
49 behaviours perform better than those who do not ask for help (Byrne *et al.*, 2014). However, it is also
50 clear that asking for help is more common among students with high self-efficacy and confidence in
51 their abilities, as well as among students who have previously had positive experiences when asking
52 for help (Winograd and Rust, 2014).
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56 Student respondents to the survey described the role that advocacy from their coach/mentor played in
57 opening up a wider infrastructure of help and support at the institution. Examples of this ranged from
58 support with academic or course content, as well as with wider specialist student support teams:
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3 My [coach/mentor] helped to improve my confidence by challenging my thinking and
4 encouraging me to seek support from either my tutor or Student Support Team when necessary.
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7 My [coach/mentor] has helped me in every area of my life she has helped me tremendously to
8 find slides from my tutor and university site also helped to be more confident.
9
10

11 The [coaching and mentoring] service help in motivating me towards my course work. We do
12 discussed the module result and how to improve, and if there is a low mark she did encourage
13 me to do more and contact the tutor for more explanation on how to do my assignments. She
14 helped me to really have a focus. Sometimes we do discussed other things like how to
15 overcome health challenges to concentrate on my studies.
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19 I would like to thank my [coach/mentor] for making me to know about SCONUL [library
20 scheme], also for introducing a tutor for academic English to me and monitoring the progress of
21 the lecture which I am still enjoying till now. He shows concern about my final module, which
22 he promised to guide me through the registration when I come back from my holiday in July
23 when the result of EMA [end of module assessment] is out.
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29 Working with my [coach/mentor] has made me aware of other options I wasn't aware of.
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32 In these cases, and many others, students described feeling enabled to access the support that they
33 were entitled to but not yet accessing – in most cases due to a range of institutional barriers. The
34 significance of this can be further understood when we consider the wider empirical evidence that
35 students from underrepresented groups often avoid asking for help in HE. One US study found, for
36 example, that:
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40 Students who experience stereotype threat feel burdened by nature of belonging to a group for
41 whom *others may have expectations of academic failure* [emphasis added]. Students from
42 underrepresented backgrounds have been found to express greater apprehension than other
43 students that poor performance would be seen as linked inextricably to their ethnic background
44 ... even students who themselves do not regard stereotypes about their academic ability as true
45 may be reluctant to seek needed help with course material, because to do so would risk
46 confirming such stereotypes. Thus, the potential for being perceived as less capable could cause
47 some students to disengage from the very resources that are designed to be helpful to them.
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53 (Winograd and Rust, 2014, p. 22)
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55 It is important to acknowledge, then, that help-seeking at university is affected by societal and
56 systemic discrimination and the narrative stereotypes associated with 'failure' it generates. The
57 evidence from this student experience survey suggests that coaching and mentoring is an intervention
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3 which may support students to access varying forms of support without the stigmatising or
4 pathologising impact it can often have.
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7 When situated within this broader context, then, the impact of coaching and mentoring on student
8 readiness to ask for help is significant. More proactive help-seeking behaviours from students is likely
9 to have a longer term impact on their academic success and engagement at university, as well as
10 enhance the student experience of study with the institution. These initial findings raise further
11 questions about the potential for coaching and mentoring interventions to play a role in overcoming
12 systemic barriers to the success of underrepresented groups at university – questions which future
13 practitioner research will help to answer.
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18 ***Recognising strengths and achievements***

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20 Student-led coaching and mentoring is an intervention which offers institutions an opportunity to
21 centre the lived experiences of students. This is particularly relevant for Black students in UK HE
22 who are likely to experience a curriculum and culture which ‘others’ them and their experiences. As
23 scholars such as Arday *et al.* (2022) have argued in relation to students from a variety of
24 underrepresented ethnic groups, ‘in many cases, ethnic minority students are engaging with a
25 curriculum that does not reflect their socialisation, worldview, history or lived experience’ (p. 14).
26 Respondents to the student experience survey described the effect of having a space held for them –
27 for their stories and experiences – and challenging narratives around expectations of failure. Many
28 students shared that they felt encouraged by their coach/mentor to recognise their strengths and
29 harness them in their studies, as well as generating self-awareness:
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37 My [coach/mentor] encouraged me to acknowledge my weaknesses but focus more on my
38 strengths. The strategy helped me reflect on my achievements rather than dwelling on my
39 failures. It boosted my self-esteem and kept me motivated.
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42 I was able to have a clear understand[ing] of my strength and work on my weakness. She
43 help[ed] me to get stronger and more confident.
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47 Having a dedicated [coach/mentor] to talk to and discuss my goals, and personal issues has
48 helped me to stay focus on my studies, identify my strengths, achievements and what would
49 work better for me in terms of learning strategies. I have found the service invaluable and
50 looked forward to the sessions. My [coach/mentor] was always approachable, easy to
51 communicate with, listened to my concerns and provided guidance. I think having this
52 dedicated resource helps to keep you motivated knowing that you can talk to someone should
53 there be any concerns. My [coach/mentor] helped me through some very challenging times
54 towards the end and provided valuable information to assist me further.
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3 Some students went deeper in their reflections and made connections between the reframing of their
4 personal narratives, lifting of limiting beliefs and better grades:
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7 My [coach/mentor] challenged my some of my patterns/blocks of thinking (with permission),
8 enabled slight paradigm shifts and support and encouraged me consistently. This alone
9 improved my TMA [tutor marked assessment] grades by about 10% and created new ways of
10 how I approached some of my personal challenges within work and home. It enabled more time
11 balance within my life structures and was a great source of information and guidance.
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16 My [coach/mentor] encouraged me to keep going, consistently reminded me of my worth and
17 achievements, suggesting options such [as] the student support session and [coaching]
18 webinars, which I utilised and helped me greatly. My [coach/mentor] always focused on my
19 personal goals and so there was a clear focus for each session, as well as space for me to reflect
20 and reach my own conclusions by talking things through.
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25 I truly believe without [my coach/mentor] I would have dropped out ... She has been so great
26 to me and has honestly helped me in more ways than I can explain. She has made me just
27 remember how [far] I have come in life and how much I have achieved so far and how proud I
28 should be of my hard work.
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32 What students described here was the impact of a mindset shift; these and many other respondents
33 moved from feeling like a 'problem' or underachieving student to being able to contextualise their
34 experiences and apply them to their current studies with positive effect.
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37 ***Personal growth and self-awareness***

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39 Finally, students described in a variety of ways the wider, more holistic impact that coaching and
40 mentoring had on their lives as distance-learning students – many with familial, community and
41 work-related commitments alongside their studies. Many of the students shared the impact that
42 coaching and mentoring had on their wider lives:
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46 I could honestly talk about [my coach/mentor] all day, she has not only helped me
47 academically, but I have also been able to apply the knowledge given to my personal life. I will
48 be formally acknowledging [my coach/mentor] as she is truly an asset. I know I would not have
49 the confidence I have now if it was not for her work. Amazing lady, its [sic] unfortunate I can't
50 keep her with me forever.
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55 My [coach/mentor] was a great help to me regarding my studies. She kept me on track and
56 encouraged me to look at the feedback and work towards a higher score. Her positive outlook
57 and support helped me in my personal life away from studying too I highly recommend
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3 students accessing the [coaching and mentoring] program. Going forward I'm able to use the
4 skills I obtained to finish my studies and move on to a career in counselling.
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7 I have had some very challenging times to deal with, in this year of studying, and I know with
8 assurance this would not have been possible without the belief and encouragement of my
9 [coach/mentor]. I have grown in confidence in my own ability by the end of my studies. The
10 planned session [was] very focused and not limited to a change in direction if that was needed.
11
12 I was empowered to achieve. Practical step by step guides were tailored to my needs, to support
13 me to complete my modules and assignments.
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18 As these examples demonstrate, students often chose to focus on exploring solutions for issues in their
19 lives outside of study – which, in turn, helped them to become more successful students and in their
20 career planning. This also strengthens the case for coaching and mentoring interventions being offered
21 as part of a person-centred student support offer at university.
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25 **Summary**

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27 In this case study, we have sought to share the initial findings from a student experience survey
28 evaluating a coaching and mentoring intervention at a distance-learning provider. It is important to
29 acknowledge here that the 102 Black students who completed the survey were a diverse cohort of
30 individuals, and their experiences should not, of course, be homogenised or over-simplified.
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32 However, we have attempted to show in this case study that the targeted coaching and mentoring
33 received high levels of student satisfaction, alongside compelling student endorsement. Most
34 importantly, we have collated some initial evidence about the key areas of student experience which
35 can be positively affected by coaching and mentoring interventions.
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41 **Limitations**

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43 This case study cannot claim to be representative of any homogenised 'Black' student experience, and
44 further, more granular studies of differentiated support for Black Asian, Black Caribbean, Black
45 British and other ethnicities will be important. We have acknowledged that there are potentially
46 intersections of disadvantage to be considered within any given cohort of students, but it is also
47 important to recognise that barriers exist for students from racially minoritised backgrounds which do
48 not affect White students with different lived experience. Further research is needed before we can be
49 confident about whether institutions should use coaching and mentoring interventions to overcome
50 systemic issues for racially minoritised students and whether they should be helping to drive the
51 strategic agenda around student equity in HE in the UK. It would also be important to understand how
52 coaching and mentoring might benefit students from other ethnicities and from other underrepresented
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groups, such as those from areas of socio-economic deprivation or students with disabilities or mental health needs.

Implications

The analysis of student experiences we have presented here will, we hope, be of practical interest to student support practitioners within and outside of HE. In identifying four key themes in the student free-text comments, we found that students' general sense of encouragement from their coaches resulted in tangible outcomes for feelings and behaviour and a perceived impact on continuation of study or retention. Our finding that a coaching and mentoring approach provides Black students with an opportunity to tap into their existing knowledge, skills and lived experiences to feel validated and listened to also has wider strategic implications for how 'targeted' support for at-risk students is designed and delivered. We hope that this will be of interest to other providers seeking to challenge the myths around deficiencies in the resilience or skills of students from underrepresented groups.

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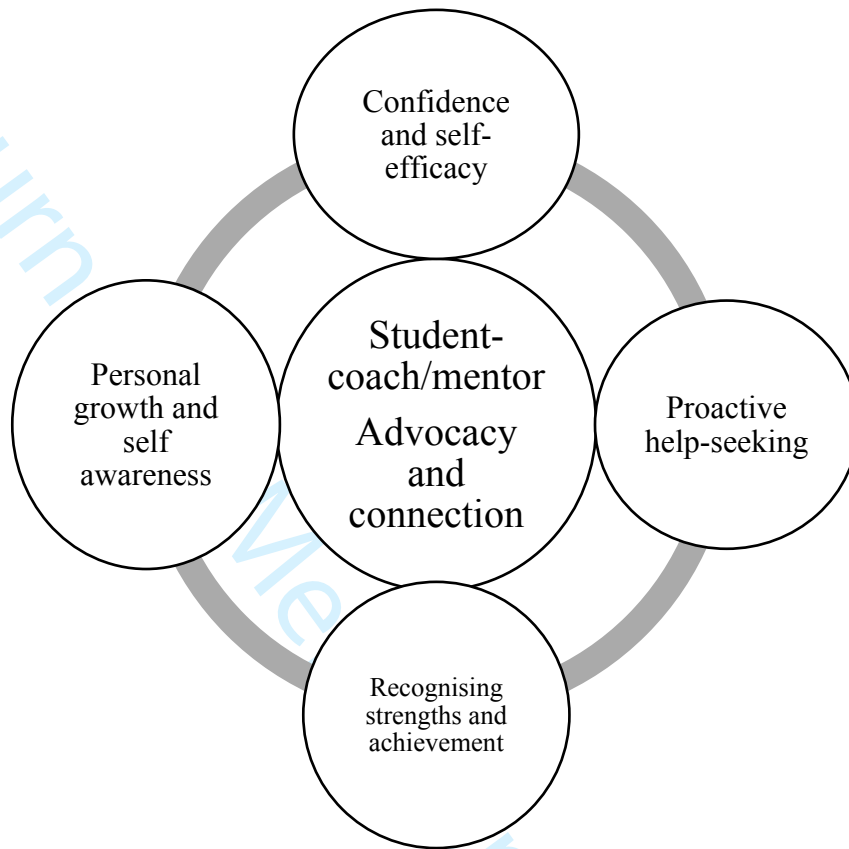
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Figure 1. Illustration of key themes in student experiences of coaching and mentoring

Source: Created by authors



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Table 1. Summary of student responses to Likert-scale questions
Source: Created by authors

Overall, I am satisfied with the support received [from my coach/mentor].	100% (strongly agree or agree)
My [coach/mentor] took time to explore and discuss with me how we could work together to support my studies.	100% (strongly agree or agree)
I was encouraged to choose the focus of my coaching and mentoring sessions.	100% (strongly agree or agree)
The email and text communications I received from the service and my coach/mentor were clear.	99% (strongly agree or agree)
My coach/mentor listened with interest and empathy when I shared my experiences, success and/or challenges with my studies.	98% (strongly agree or agree)
My coach/mentor took time to get to know me and help me identify and work towards my goals.	97% (strongly agree or agree)
My coach/mentor helped me to access further support and/or resources at university and/or external to the university.	97% (strongly agree or agree)
I felt able to trust in the confidentiality and safety of coaching and mentoring conversations with my coach/mentor.	96% (strongly agree or agree)