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Bringing joy back into higher education: the potential contribution of coaching

Abstract

Purpose: There are significant challenges facing academics and senior leaders in higher education (HE) institutions internationally. These challenges have led to increasing levels of metrification and managerialism, which has fostered work intensification, reduced professional autonomy, stress, and burnout among faculty staff. Traditional approaches for supporting and developing staff, such as mentoring and training, do not provide the resources faculty staff need to meet the challenges they face. In contrast, experiences in various other educational and professional settings have demonstrated the effectiveness of workplace coaching in fostering wellbeing, adaptability, flexibility, and sustainable performance. This review argues that workplace coaching could similarly support academics.

Approach: A critical literature review evaluates coaching interventions across educational and comparable sectors to identify positive wellbeing and performance-based outcomes.

Findings: While there is limited research into the efficacy of coaching interventions for faculty staff in HE, research in other educational, as well as comparable professional contexts, identifies significant sustainable improvements in wellbeing and performance for professional staff.

Originality: While there are published research studies on the positive outcomes of coaching in primary and secondary educational contexts, as well as for postgraduate research students, there is very limited knowledge, practice and research about coaching faculty staff in HE. This article addresses this by critically reviewing a broad range of literature to identify coaching and research initiatives for faculty staff in HE institutions.

Practical implications: The evidence that identifies positive outcomes of coaching in professional workplace contexts is compelling. This critical review uses some of that evidence base to propose an agenda to implement coaching programmes that support faculty staff to improve their wellbeing and performance.

Keywords: Coaching; higher education; wellbeing; performance; workplace

Article classification: Conceptual

Introduction

Background and context

> George: Was it 4.00 am or 4.30 am I woke up last night thinking about work? I need to check the sleep tracker and find out. What was it I was worried about? Ah yes, I'm meeting Jenny and Christian on Zoom later today, and I've not done what I promised on our paper. It must have been guilt and stress dragging me from deep sleep, through light sleep to a kind of drowsy wakefulness. OK, I've got half an hour before the meeting, I'll see what I can knock up."
>
> Jenny: It's 7 pm, the night before my meeting with George and Christian and it's been another intensive day. I'm exhausted. What to do? I've got to work on the sections of the paper I promised, and feel guilty I haven't already sent them. I'll set the alarm for 5 am and then I can work for a few hours before our meeting at 9 am.
>
> Christian: When I glanced through my meetings for the day, I noticed a meeting to talk about "coaching in higher education" with George and Jenny. I was overcome with a feeling of dread. The article was on my "to do" list but had been consistently pushed further down the list by more urgent tasks. Should I send my apologies for the meeting? Perhaps I could ask for a postponement? Maybe I could just apologise and ask for more time. But will I ever be able to find time to work on this article?

If you are an academic, it is likely you will have similar experiences of constantly trying to meet deadlines. You might also have experienced reluctance to make visible a sense of overwhelm at work. An interesting piece of self- reflection is that, even amongst trained coaches, it took us time to share concerns. The pursuit of "busy", common in much of contemporary society, is present also in academia. Most academics were drawn to universities to make a difference, to continue a passion for lifelong learning, to add to a field of research, and to inspire future generations of students – not to wake up worrying about work.

Ironically, the paper that was causing the three of us concern is about the academic work intensification that leads to sleepless nights. Our idea was to write a paper which explores how a coaching approach to personal and professional development might be effective in promoting wellbeing and personal and professional growth within higher education (HE). Might such an approach even create space for joy and love – for the work and for the self? Challenging topics, but we think it is worth the risk of exploring feelings, experiences and emotions. To put it another way, what are the risks of not doing so? To answer that question, the next section will explore the intensification and managerialism of HE.

Metrics and managerialism in HE

As Boliver (2015) argues, the ending of the divide between polytechnics and universities in the UK in 1992 increased the number of universities by 50%. Combined with the introduction of student fees a few years later, UK HE began to operate within a system characterised by competition and commercialisation, a process which Knight (2022) describes as "massification and marketisation". By 2021, the UK's 165 universities were generating £40 billion of economic activity through teaching 2.4 million students (Universities UK, 2024).

Ogbonna and Harris (2004) identify work intensification and emotional labour amongst academics and conclude that these "contribute to a high degree of stress and a lack of teamwork, both of which are negatively related to performance" (p. 2000). Another research project conducted by Erickson *et al*. (2021) argues that increasing pressure of work partially explains an average satisfaction score with management of just 10.54%. They conclude that their data “reveal an acute situation of endemic bullying and harassment, chronic overwork, high levels of mental health problems, general health and wellbeing problems, and catastrophically high levels of demoralisation and dissatisfaction” (p. 2148).

In a similar vein, Anderson’s (2006) study of increasing managerialism in Australian universities cites one respondent as commenting, “The popping sound you’ve been hearing recently has been academics burning out, and that’s not sustainable” (p. 588). In a similar critique, Ryan (2012) argues neoliberalism, corporatism and managerialism has created “academic zombies” – lecturers who passively accept metrics and increased pressure as a tool of resistance and survival. A more recent report from the Wellcome Trust in the UK found that 78% of researchers believe competition is creating aggressive working conditions. The report states, “Poor research culture is leading to stress, anxiety, mental health problems, strain on personal relationships, and a sense of loneliness at work” (Moran *et al*., 2020, p. 3).

Callaghan (2022) argues that at the core is a conflict between the university as a generator and repository of critical knowledge, providing a public service, and the university as a participant in a neo-liberal HE market. The latter drives a customer culture where performance metrics, targets and audits such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (Office for Students, 2023) and the Research Excellence Framework (UK Research and Innovation, 2023) broaden and deepen in importance. These processes minimise individual autonomy while simultaneously intensifying teaching, research and administration. As one of Ogbonna and Harris’s (2004) participants comments, “Part of being a professional is retaining your professional ethics, whatever the pressure to fold” (p. 1195). This can produce a cognitive dissonance where lecturers are simultaneously responding to metrics while holding to their belief in the social mission of learning.

There is, therefore, a strong argument that the UK HE sector (and indeed that in many other nations, too) is beset by crisis, conflict and contestation. These pressures were compounded during the policy response to Covid-19 when university staff had to rapidly move to a different teaching model. As Kassem (2022) notes in their guest blog for the Higher Education Policy Institute, “most staff reported their workload increased and was difficult to manage” (para. 8).

University leaders, staff and students are facing challenges on a number of fronts. In this paper, we are seeking to explore the contribution coaching might make to addressing these challenges and difficulties. While, of course, coaching might struggle to address systemic issues such as HE funding, it has features which might prove very useful. For example, habits of deep listening, thoughtful questioning and self-reflection invite purposeful communication. This can create relationships of trust which in turn offer opportunities for individuals and institutions to grow and develop. The next sections explore this in more detail.

A model of flourishing in HE

The risk of maintaining the status quo in HE is significant, not least in terms of its effects on the wellbeing and performance of academics and related negative impacts on the student experience and institutional success. We propose that given the purpose of HE is so important, it is essential to keep exploring ways of creating more positive HE environments. In a recent grounded theory study, Rehal and van Nieuwerburgh (2022) explored the conditions needed for educators to flourish. The researchers developed a new theoretical approach described as the ecological model of flourishing educators. The theory sets out that flourishing educators experience a sense of autonomy, integrity, authenticity and agency. They are more likely to be involved in personal and professional growth activities and to have positive relationships with colleagues, leaders, students and other stakeholders. The ecological model suggests that flourishing educators exist within positive climates where they receive recognition and acknowledgement. The participants in the study reported that they were treated as professionals (rather than being micromanaged) and felt seen, trusted and valued. An important factor identified in the study was the approach of leaders within educational institutions. Leaders who prioritised educator wellbeing, demonstrated trust and embodied ways of being such as showing empathy were more likely to create positive environments. Rehal and van Nieuwerburgh (2022) suggest that flourishing educators need "a seemingly paradoxical balance of space and nourishment from their leaders and environment" (p. 40).

The focus on the review

This critical review asks the question: "What role might coaching play in breaking the cycle of work intensification and managerialism in HE to promote cultures which empower academics to flourish?" A review of the coaching research literature across HE, other educational and comparable professional contexts is considered before we discuss whether coaching interventions can promote the empowerment, wellbeing and performance of academics.

Method

We carried out a literature review of studies which involved coaching interventions in HE, as well as in other education and comparable professional contexts. This study involved no human participants and was exempt from ethical review.

We drew on a definition of coaching as a process which adopts a facilitative approach to support learning and development, where a coach uses open questions, summaries and reflections to stimulate the self-awareness and personal responsibility of the coachee

(Passmore *et al.*, 2019). The scope of this paper is the use of *coaching* within HE. This is somewhat complicated by the ongoing lack of clear demarcations between coaching and mentoring definitions and interventions (Stokes *et al.*, 2021). Recognising the complexities and contextual variations, we have focused our exploration to initiatives that are labelled coaching and adhere to the definition we have presented at the start of this paragraph while acknowledging that mentoring is also being used in HE settings to support the professional development and wellbeing of staff.

We conducted a literature review which involved searching a number of databases (APA PsycINFO, Education Research Complete and Medline) using keywords ("coaching"'; "coaching cultures"; AND "education"; or "workplace") between 2000 and 2023, which yielded over a thousand studies. Inclusion criteria were that studies identified at least one trained coach/coach-manager, and coaching took place in an educational or workplace context. This could be across different domains of practice, across sectors and modalities. Studies that met these criteria were selected by the authors on the basis of their relevance to the review aims to identify coaching practice for faculty staff in HE and professionals in other educational and comparable professional workplace contexts. The review considered evidence from 61 qualitative and quantitative studies which focused on a range of coaching interventions and identified or measured wellbeing and/or performance outcomes.

Findings

In their review of evidence on coaching and mentoring in education, Hobson and van Nieuwerburgh (2022) highlight the need to expand the evidence base to include HE. In the same paper, they call for research that focuses on improving the wellbeing of those involved in education. This review begins by exploring historical and current staff development interventions for faculty staff and the gaps in practice and research for coaching interventions in this context. This is followed by a review of the evidence base for other educational and comparable professional contexts.

Historical and current staff development focus in HE

Within HE, there is a history of supporting staff through formal and informal mentoring and (to a lesser extent) coaching. The majority of these interventions have been designed to enhance the performance of faculty (e.g. Burleigh *et al.*, 2023) and support the academic success of students (e.g. Dahan *et al.*, 2023). Universities also offer counselling support, perhaps in recognition of what Morrish (2019, p. 9) describes as “an escalation of poor mental health amongst academic staff”.

However, there are relatively few studies focusing directly on the use of coaching to enhance the wellbeing of staff in HE contexts. In the workplace, wellbeing is usually assessed across three distinct domains: context free (e.g. life satisfaction), work specific (e.g. job satisfaction), and work life (e.g. work–life balance) (Fox *et al.*, 2021).

Research into mentoring in HE includes Thomas *et al.*’s (2015) study which found some evidence supporting the adoption of mentoring for early career academics in a large US university. Similarly, Harvey *et al.* (2017), in their Australian study, recommended a flexible approach to mentoring which included one-to-one and group mentoring. Another interesting study on mentoring relationships within liberal arts colleges (Lunsford *et al.*, 2018) in the United States found that 86% of faculty members had been either a mentor or a mentee. Another found a positive impact of mentoring on early career academics (Sargent and Rienties, 2022). More recently, reverse mentoring has been used as a way of enhancing staff–student relationships. The traditional mentor–mentee relationship was flipped at a university in England, with students acting as mentors for staff with the purpose of developing more inclusive teaching practices (Cain *et al.*, 2022). This is an area of increased research, with a recent review of the literature by Chaudhuri *et al.* (2022) concluding that reverse mentoring can be effective in bridging the divide between intergenerational groups and promoting inclusivity.

While traditional mentoring is seen as more directive than coaching (van Nieuwerburgh *et al.*, 2019), these two development activities might be best conceptualised as being on a spectrum. Indeed, Lunsford and her colleagues Baker and Pifer used a definition of relationship quality in mentoring which contains coaching characteristics. They wrote,

> This research characterises high quality relationships by their tensility, emotional tone and openness. Tensility refers to the ability of relational partners to engage even after difficult or challenging interactions. Emotional tone refers to an expression of negative and positive emotions in the relationship. Openness refers to connecting individuals with new ideas and ways of thinking. (Lunsford *et al.*, 2018, p. 142)

A paper by Whipp and Pengelley (2017), where coaching and mentoring were used as part of a study looking at peer observation of teaching, found that the strengths-based approach of the coach–mentors enhanced the confidence of participants’ teaching ability. It should be noted, however, that the number of participants who fully completed the programme was relatively low. Nevertheless, it is an example of coaching/mentoring being applied in a tertiary educational context, with limited success. Additionally, Burleigh *et al*. (2023) conducted a literature review of coaching and teaching – but with a firm focus on performance feedback – writing, “Leaders in HE face several barriers when they coach faculty to improve teaching performance” (p. 8).

While respecting the thought and efforts these authors put into developing ideas around feedback, it is our contention that coaching best serves academics through creating space for personal and professional reflection and growth – inviting transformation from the inside out rather than the outside in. This approach creates space for agency, with the person receiving the coaching driving the process. This can be contrasted to mentoring, where a more experienced (and usually senior colleague) offers what they see as the best guidance and advice. As Harvey *et al.* (2017) wrote, “There may also be a risk when mentors do not respond to the needs of the mentees but rather respond to what they think might be the needs of the institution” (p. 164). As we mentioned earlier, coaching and mentoring are on a spectrum, but we argue coaching offers more potential for individual agency and the related benefit of tapping into intrinsic motivation and promoting wellbeing.

There are some studies which have highlighted the potential benefits of coaching interventions for improving wellbeing for postgraduate research students (David and Cobeanu, 2016; Grant, 2003, 2008; Grant and O’Connor, 2010) and for other university students (Alzen *et al.*, 2021; Atad and Grant, 2021; Jones and Smith, 2022; Lefdahl-Davis *et al.*, 2018; Marino *et al.*, 2020; Sepulveda *et al.*, 2020; Spencer, 2021; Wang and Lu, 2020). However, there is relatively little research on the use of coaching to support the personal and professional development of faculty-based staff. An exception would be one US study which considered the benefits of providing executive coaching to support the leadership capacity of academic deans (Bertrand, 2019). The small-scale study found that executive coaching was positively received by participants, who reported improvements in their empathetic behaviour, self-awareness and self-care. Another study considered how to respond to the challenging experiences of faculty staff using an integrated coaching approach which supported academics to bring together different aspects of their personal and professional lives (Gillaspy, 2019). A case study of the use of coaching and mentoring in a university setting in Oman showed that coaching, specifically, has the potential of being an effective approach to supporting professional development. Coaching was seen to create a collegial atmosphere, leading to greater trust and more open communication across the organisation (Hakro and Mathew, 2020).

In summary, while there is a very limited evidence base for coaching in promoting wellbeing, and associated performance-based outcomes for faculty staff in HE, there has been at least some research which highlights its potential. The next section will consider how coaching interventions have been assessed in other education settings.

How is coaching being used in other educational contexts?

Coaching has been used widely in primary (elementary) and secondary (high school) settings globally (Warnock *et al*., 2022). Studies have shown that coaching can be successful in enhancing teaching practice (pedagogy), supporting educational leadership development and building educators' confidence.

A leading researcher has proposed that coaching is an effective professional development process for the education sector (Lofthouse, 2019). Multiple studies have shown a link between coaching and improved teaching practices (Allan, 2007; Gore, 2014; Kraft and Blazar, 2017; Ng, 2012; Shidler, 2009; Yirci *et al.*, 2016). In a few cases, coaching has been deemed to have had a positive effect on both the pedagogy and wellbeing of educators (Adams, 2012; Barr and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2015; Kutsyuruba *et al.*, 2019).

Another main area of research focus has been on the role of coaching to support leadership development in educational settings. Numerous studies have suggested that coaching is an effective way of supporting the skills and capacities of educators with leadership responsibilities (Blackman, 2010; Goff, 2014; Gray, 2017; Klar *et al*., 2019, van Nieuwerburgh *et al*, 2020; Weathers and White, 2015).

There have also been studies into the role of coaching to support trainee teachers to enhance confidence. In one study, coaching fostered a sense of confidence and ownership in pre-service teachers while also helping them to develop practical skills, resilience and efficacy (Stahl *et al*., 2016). Other studies have explored the use of coaching to build the confidence of trainee teachers in different parts of the world (Bodur and Crawford, 2016; Hooker, 2014; Lu, 2010; Trautwein and Ammerman, 2010). Further, studies have shown that coaching can be used to embed professional development in educational settings (Brown, 2011; Netolicky, 2016; Reinke *et al*., xxxx) and can be an effective way of educators providing support to each other (Charteris and Smardon, 2014; Lofthouse and Hall, 2014; Zepeda *et al*., 2013).

There is an emerging evidence base for school-based coaching interventions and their efficacy in enhancing resilience, developing constructive leadership behaviours and improving practitioner wellbeing. Improvements in resilience were identified for 44 high school teachers in a secondary school context in Australia (Grant *et al*., 2010). In a qualitative study which involved five positive psychology coaching sessions, utilising a strengths-based approach and semi-structured interviews with three newly qualified teachers, the participants identified a number of beneficial outcomes. These included normalising challenges and increasing self-acceptance and compassion, greater levels of sensemaking for challenging experiences, increased positive emotion, as well as unconditional support, reassurance and validation from the coaching experience (Lucey and van Nieuwerburgh, 2021). The benefits of coaching interventions to support wellbeing have been identified with other staff groups in educational contexts. In a study involving 65 Nigerian secondary school administrators, over a 12-week period, there were significant reductions in perceived stress (Ogba *et al.*, 2020).

In summary, there is a comprehensive evidence base for coaching being used to effectively support the professional practice, leadership development, confidence, resilience and wellbeing of educators in primary and secondary settings.

How is coaching being used in other professional contexts?

There is an emerging evidence base for the efficacy of coaching across a broad range of other comparable professional contexts to HE, such as health care, policing and financial services, in terms of the benefits of enhancing practitioner resilience, leadership behaviours and improved wellbeing.

In a study involving 41 nursing executives working in a public health agency in Australia, where 21 participants engaged in four coaching sessions and 20 participants in leadership training, significant differences were found between the groups with the coaching group demonstrating higher levels of resilience. Additionally, participants receiving the coaching intervention reported increases in self-confidence, personal insight and enhanced management (Grant *et al.*, 2009). In another study, involving 60 nurses experiencing moderate to severe job burnout while working in a general hospital in China, a coaching intervention was associated with significantly increased positive mood, measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey and Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (Luo *et al.*, 2019). A study involving 69 GPs working in rural South Australia participating in a 9-hour coaching programme found significantly reduced levels of stress. Additionally, 94% of participants in the coaching programme remained in practice over a 3-year period compared to 80% of the control group (Gardiner *et al.*, 2013).

The benefits of coaching interventions to promote wellbeing have also been identified within the policing sector. A study involving 50 senior police employees in the UK participating in eight 60-minute coaching sessions over a 12-week period demonstrated a significant reduction in irrational beliefs, as measured by the Irrational Performance Beliefs Inventory, increased self-determined motivation, as measured by an adapted version of the Sport Motivation Scale, and increased wellbeing, as measured by the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction in General Scale following intervention (Jones *et al*., 2021). Similarly, a study involving 151 serving police officers in Nigeria, 76 participants were assigned to a coaching intervention over a 16-week period and demonstrated significant improvement in their life satisfaction and mood, measured by the Subjective Wellbeing Scale immediately after the intervention and at 3-month follow-up. In comparison, no significant improvements for wellbeing were identified in the control group (Onyishi *et al.*, 2021).

There is also evidence that coaching interventions have efficacy in promoting the wellbeing of leaders and managers working in the finance sector. In a study involving 59 managers in an Italian bank who participated in a coaching intervention, significant reductions in the level of irrational beliefs, measured using the General Attitudes and Beliefs Scale, and reductions in depressed mood, measured using the Profile of Emotional Distress, were found (David *et al.*, 2016). In another study, involving six employees working in a financial services company in the UK, participants who were coached using the GROW model identified a number of beneficial outcomes when interviewed. These included valuing unconditional support and empathy from their coaches, which they linked to feeling “safe” and associated with deepening their reflection. Participants also reported a reduction in feelings of anxiety, feeling energised and future focused, and experiencing renewed confidence (van Nieuwerburgh *et al.*, 2021).

In summary, there is a growing evidence base for the value of implementing coaching programmes in both educational (primary and secondary) as well as other professional contexts for supporting professional staff wellbeing, performance and their sustainability.

Discussion

There are significant challenges for faculty staff in HE, particularly at a senior level, who are attempting to meet the demands of external stakeholders while simultaneously being aware of the internal demand (at least among many academics) to uphold notions of academic freedom and autonomy. Academics and their managers know there is a problem around academic work intensification, increased metrification and managerialism (Anderson, 2006; Ogbonna and Harris, 2004; Ryan, 2012).

To address this and as part of professional development programmes, leaders in HE have typically drawn on traditional forms of support. Mentoring of some sort is offered to induct academics into new roles, typically associated with performance metrics aligned to institutional strategic imperatives, which often lead to stress, anxiety and burnout (Lunsford *et al.*, 2018). Given the increasingly intensive pressure on academics to teach well, publish and take on administration (Anderson, 2006; Beynon, 2016), it is time to stimulate curiosity around additional interventions and approaches for academic staff development. We argue that coaching offers a route by which these tensions might be used to creatively co-create a working environment that recognises academic passion and uses this energy to work through and around competing demands and complex trade-offs.

As highlighted in the literature review, while there is a limited evidence base for coaching interventions for faculty staff, there is a substantive and growing evidence base for coaching interventions in comparable workplaces. Coaching conversations *at the very least* open the space for respectful dialogue, which is likely to support some level of empowerment of individual academics. Additionally, the habit of self-reflection, which can be established through coaching, may sustain (or re-ignite) academic energy and passion by identifying realistic goals (Grant *et al*., 2009), individual strengths (Whipp and Pengelley, 2017) and sources of support to enhance performance and its sustainability (Blackman, 2010; Goff, 2014).

The evidence from other workplace sectors suggests that coaching has the potential to increase flexibility, adaptability and resilience in HE contexts which are characterised by rapid organisational change, work intensification and increased metrification and managerialism (Grant *et al*., 2009; Jones *et al*., 2021; van Nieuwerburgh *et al*., 2021). Such adaptation in the face of challenge and adversity fosters learning cultures which promote resilience and wellbeing among colleagues as well as students. This in turn may improve the student satisfaction and research metrics which are, in a competitive marketplace, of concern to university leaders.

However, the premise of this article is that we should also heed the cautionary note of Hobson and van Nieuwerburgh (2022) in that coaching and mentoring programmes in educational settings should not “achieve positive impacts, such as advancing participants’ learning, development and/or job-related performance, *at the expense* of their wellbeing” (p. xx). From this perspective, positive psychology coaching (PPC) may prove to be a fruitful avenue for exploration and experimentation, especially in university settings. PPC is a methodology that integrates wellbeing into coaching conversations. PPC is defined as “a managed conversational process that supports people to achieve meaningful goals in a way that enhances their wellbeing” (p. 315). According to van Nieuwerburgh and Biswas-Diener (2020, PPC is informed by relevant psychological theories such as wellbeing theory (e.g.

Ryff, 1989), strengths theories (e.g. Park *et al*., 2004), positive emotion theories (e.g. Fredrickson, 2001) and hope theory (Snyder, 2002), among others. Primarily, it is the coach's knowledge of theories related to optimal human functioning that supports them to ask better questions, rather than necessarily bringing those theories explicitly into the coaching conversation.

Integrating specialist and high-quality coaching interventions into HE is not without challenges. A recently published case study on the use of coaching in a HE institution in the Middle East (Mathew and Hakrob, 2022) provides us with some of the potential obstacles that should be considered. First, the study participants highlighted "a general lack of time to engage in coaching, especially amidst hectic schedules" (p. 74. Given our introduction and some of our own professional experiences, this is a significant challenge that will need to be addressed. Ironically, the intervention that we are proposing as a way to overcome some of the challenges could be perceived to add to the time pressures that academics are experiencing. Second, the case study highlights concerns about "culture and trust issues" (p. 74). Certainly, the systemic factors that underlie the current trend towards academic work intensification will need to be addressed. Broader questions about the suitability and openness to coaching in certain academic work cultures will also need to be asked. Third, the authors note that it can be challenging to build sustainable coaching models and processes when the immediate benefits of coaching are not evident. Work towards building "coaching cultures" takes time (Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh, 2014), so it will be important to ensure sufficient resources to support such programmes until it is possible to measure success. Fourth, the study highlighted cases of a lack of rapport or trust between academics and their coaches, especially when there were line management relationships involved. Building trust and confidence in the confidentiality and integrity of coaching programmes will be critical, especially in HE contexts.

Further research is needed to understand the experiences of academics who have received various forms of coaching and the effectiveness of coaching interventions in university settings. Coaching and mentoring programmes in HE institutions should be carefully evaluated, and research should be undertaken to understand the impact that they are having. It will be important to have appropriate tools to measure the proposed benefits of coaching programmes, such as optimism, greater trust, engagement and collegiality. One such measure is currently being developed at the RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences (Burke *et al.*, forthcoming). Importantly, any research which seeks to identify the benefits of coaching should consider whether and how these benefits are experienced across diverse groups of faculty staff, working in different societal and organisational cultures and the experience of coaching for individual differences, such as neurodiversity. It is only in this way that we will learn as a diverse academic community so that we can grow and thrive together.

While this type of research is necessary and urgent, we believe that there is sufficient research evidence in the broader education and comparable professional sectors to warrant further experimentation with coaching initiatives in HE institutions which supports the wellbeing of academics.

Conclusion

As argued at the beginning of this paper, UK HE has undergone a systemic turn towards marketisation. While many more students experience university education, and while UK society and economy benefit from university research, there are substantial costs in terms of the health and wellbeing of academic staff (Morrish, 2019). We argue that coaching has much to offer both individual academics and the system of leadership and management they work within. For individuals, coaching offers a space to work through conflicting priorities, create boundaries, identify goals, build confidence and develop a plan of action. It also invites academic leaders and managers to listen more and tell less. This challenges traditional hierarchies and power structures, but the depth of understanding prompted by deeper listening opens up space for the co-creation of an improved academic working culture – one that benefits staff, students and our broader society.

A call to action?

At both an individual and institutional level, we need to make a transformational shift in the personal and professional development of academics, as well as supporting wellbeing. Coaching can make a substantial contribution to this transformation. For individual academics, now is the time to consider how coaching conversations might support you to identify what is essential in your work, your strengths, where you can make the most positive contribution and what you might have to say no to. In essence, what can you do, as an academic, to bring joy back into your academic life – and to use this positive energy to deepen and share your academic passions? For the leaders of institutions, what can you do to listen more deeply to academic colleagues? What processes might you put in place which will help co-create a more positive and productive working environment?

In this spirit, we began by sharing our subjective experiences of challenging working contexts. We would like to finish by each sharing one positive experience of coaching.

> George: During the lockdown of 2020 I was discussing next career steps with a coach, specifically the barriers I was putting in place to stop me going for promotion to Chair. Fear around rejection and looking weak in front of peers were front of mind. She asked me “what would you say to your daughter Heather (12 at the time) if she was fearful of taking on a new challenge at school?” With no hesitation I replied “I’d

encourage her to try her best and to go for it. I'd tell her that even if she did not succeed she will have learned a lot." Her reply was "OK then, what's that telling you about your next steps?" This lived experience of how reflective questions can elicit insight and change demonstrated the strength of coaching. Eighteen months later I was promoted to Professor and am now leading a coaching culture change programme in my Faculty.

Jenny: For most of my academic career I've experienced imposter phenomenon. No matter what my achievements, I have been my harshest critic. Setting unrealistic goals; overworking; rigid perfectionist ideals; prestigious papers published and dismissed as fluke or luck. Coaching has enabled me to reframe my beliefs and that has opened up a space to enjoy working with others, collaboratively and authentically.

Christian: I have always loved the idea of working in HE but was late in getting into the sector. When I joined, the experience was different to what I had been expecting – and I had some doubts about whether I had made the right decision. In my second year at university, I sought out a trusted coach. It was empowering and reassuring to speak to someone confidentially – I could explore my doubts in a safe environment. Towards the end of the conversation, my coach summarised and asked me a question "So you've been in HE for two years. It's something you've always wanted to do – but it was different to what you expected. Now that you've talked this through, how are you feeling about your future?" "This work is important. I'm going to stick with it and make it work", I said.

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