

The importance of coaching in higher education



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Executive Summary

SUMS is a membership-based higher education consultancy, a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation that provides expert consulting to universities across all professional service areas.

Here, *Felicity Gasparro, SUMS Associate Consultant*, discusses current insights into higher education institution (HEI) coaching following an extensive and successful coaching assignment with a high-profile red brick university. She explores:

- Research into the popularity of coaching in the UK as one route to developing staff, and understanding as to why coaching has continued to boom as workers pursue post pandemic recovery - with a specific focus on how coaching can be beneficial to leaders and all staff when working through organisational and cultural change
- A case study of the work with a SUMS member institution, which highlights why the assignment was commissioned, how it was shaped and developed, the multi-faceted approach to scoping and delivering the work, and the benefits identified by those who participated in the coaching.

Learn more about our coaching and professional development services through the [SUMS Consulting website](#).

Introduction

We previously wrote about the value of Coaching for Academic and Professional Service Staff in the midst of the pandemic and its precursor which highlighted the opportunities to enhance performance of university staff through Coaching and the power of Coaching to individuals and teams in a VUCA¹ world. The theme which transcends both pieces and remains true as we start the year 2024, is SUMS' commitment to enabling others - whatever their university job role - to come through challenging headwinds, fitter than before. The perfect storm of uncertainty has continued to develop over the last five years through a range of big themes including:

- Widespread sector funding issues, not least impacted through the hiatus in degree fees for a further two years, and a simultaneous call on universities to provide greater funding support for students.
- Regulation (or signals of greater regulation) through the OfS.
- Demonstration of value for money and research impact
- Competitive student recruitment conditions most recently impacted through challenges in international recruitment.
- The Covid-19 pandemic, which enforced new ways of teaching, learning and assessing work overnight, and whilst there have been some key positive takeaways from this 'shock to the system', complexity to the ways and means of teaching and learning, and to students' expectations of accessing learning, have complicated the learning offers available in the sector
- Greater choice for students at all level, when accessing higher education, including through the popular growth of higher degree apprenticeships and asynchronous online learning.
- The knock on impact of the pandemic to the UK populace in regards to its attitude to education, work and striking a work life balance, leading to the widely reported 'Great Resignation' and pressure in the labour market which runs with high vacancies and low unemployment. This connects back to the requirement for universities to clearly articulate compelling graduate outcomes.
- Public sector pay and pension union unrest and simultaneous ascendancy of students as consumers, leading to sector wide tension caused by marking and assessment boycotts, and an understandable desire of students, to receive quality teaching, assessment and awarded degrees at the end of their studies
- The ongoing narrative and impact of the cost of living crisis on staff and students alike
- The well documented surge in mental ill health amongst university students
- High profile perspectives regarding the value of university studies to individuals

The picture is complex, dynamic, and challenging for UK universities, and staff at the coalface of teaching and supporting university communities, as well as leading in-depth research missions, need to be adequately equipped to respond well to the climate of substantial change.

¹ VUCA - volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. It describes the situation of constant, unpredictable change that has become the norm

We recognise that in order to come through these challenging headwinds fitter than before, university staff must be enabled to optimise their performance to allow for strong and consistent workplace performance despite sector and global turbulence. Staff must be able to put on their own oxygen masks first, to enable them to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty, and remain focused on delivering the totality of ultimate benefit from their HEI to the communities it serves.

What is coaching?

“Coaching aims to produce optimal performance and improvement at work. It focuses on specific skills and goals and may also have an impact on an individual’s [or group’s] personal attributes such as social interaction or confidence. The process typically lasts for a defined period of time or forms the basis of an on-going management style.”

source: CIPD²

Coaching can often be mistaken for counselling, mentoring, or consulting, yet it is easily distinguishable from its cousins.

The differences between therapy, consulting and coaching are well depicted by Dr Bethany Peters, ACC:

WHAT IS COACHING?

Coaching, consulting, and therapy are frequently confused. Here is a guide to understanding some key differences.

<p>THERAPY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ THERAPIST GUIDES SOLUTIONS ■ INDIVIDUAL HEALING ■ PAST-FOCUSED EXPLORATION 	
<p>CONSULTING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ CONSULTANT GIVES EXPERTISE ■ ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH ■ PROBLEM-SOLUTION ANALYSIS 	
<p>COACHING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ COACH PARTNERS WITH CLIENT ■ INDIVIDUAL GROWTH ■ FUTURE-FOCUSED PROCESS 	

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² The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Dr Peters goes on to state:

“Coaching is essentially a one-on-one [and group based] learning & development intervention that is:

- *Client-driven: What’s on your agenda?*
- *Collaborative: What solutions can we co-create?*
- *Empowering: What vision do you want to see happen?*
- *Action-oriented: What is your next step?”*

The CIPD highlights the opportunities for Coaching in the workplace to incorporate:

- *“Helping competent technical experts develop better interpersonal skills, such as handling conflict*
- *Supporting an individual’s potential and providing career support*
- *Developing a more strategic perspective after a promotion to a senior role*
- *Dealing with the impact of change on an individual’s role”*

Coaching has grown in popularity across UK universities, perhaps born out of the learning cultures already embedded in the bedrock of their very being. Coaching provision may be delivered through the People (HR) function; through internally trained coaches; or contracted out to experts in the field. Each model has a place in the university workplace, as no Coaching client’s needs and coaching goals are the same.

What makes a good coach?

A good Coach will have well developed IQ, EQ, PQ and CQ, enabling them to work with their client in an agile, appropriately paced and ethical way. Through careful questioning and flexibility of Coaching style to meet the needs of the client, the Coach will be able to guide them through their own journey of discovery and outcomes. The Coach is skilled at working with their client to first seek to understand the conditions they have brought to Coaching sessions, and through the course of the sessions, enable them to frame their desired outcomes from the time invested. Session numbers are usually agreed up front of the work commencing, enabling all parties to stay focused on the Coaching challenge underway. Coaching can be delivered in a totally confidential one-to-one manner (subject to ethical confidentiality guidelines), in a group environment, or in a triad methodology whereby there is a third-party sponsor/feedback loop involved, often the client’s line manager. It is important for clients to secure the ‘right’ Coach to suit their needs, and chemistry matching sessions are encouraged for prospective clients to select the best available Coach. Trust and rapport are essential components to a successful working relationship, and the Coach will want to understand how the client wishes to be challenged and supported throughout their Coaching sessions. The Coach will also be keen to see the commitment of the client to progressing their work in between sessions, as well as reliably presenting for sessions. This is important to ensuring the client extracts maximum value from the sessions, and the investment of time.

The proven benefits of Coaching

“80% of people who receive coaching report increased self-confidence, and over 70% benefit from improved work performance, relationships, and more effective communication skills. 86% of companies report that they recouped their investment on coaching, and more...”

source: ICF³ 2009

The Institute of Coaching (IoC) sets out a range of benefits from Coaching to individuals, including:

- *“Establishing and taking action towards achieving goals*
- *Becoming more self-reliant*
- *Gaining more job and life satisfaction*
- *Contributing more effectively to the team and the organisation*
- *Taking greater responsibility and accountability for actions and commitments*
- *Working more easily and productively with others (boss, direct reports, peers)*
- *Communicating more effectively”*

The IoC goes on to establish the benefits to the organisation as being:

- *“Empowering individuals and encouraging them to take responsibility*
- *Increasing employee and staff engagement*
- *Improving individual performance*
- *Helping to identify and develop high potential employees*
- *Helping to identify both organisational and individual strengths and development opportunities*
- *Helping to motivate and empower individuals to excel*
- *Demonstrating organisational commitment to human resource development.”*

It is possible to measure the return more forensically on investment from Coaching. Research at the Henley Business School, University of Reading found that one-to-one coaching resulted in a 1:3 enhancement on a client’s ability to secure a job role or apprenticeship.

A thorough industry research project led by Dr Rebecca Jones on behalf of Henley Business School, establishes:

“Coaching provides the employee with the time; mental space; support and guidance the employee may need to make sense of the information available to them and explore how to apply it most effectively in their unique situation....

This finding is really important in terms of answering the question ‘Does coaching work?’ Not only do our findings provide clear evidence that coaching does work, furthermore the largest effect was for changes in performance which is arguably (at least from an organisation’s perspective) one of the most important outcomes.”

source: Dr Rebecca Jones (Henley Business School – The Case for Coaching Whitepaper.

³ International Coaching Federation

Coaching in practice: A case study

The Situation

Following the Covid-19 Pandemic, SUMS Consulting was commissioned by a member university to support its Academic Registry team through a period of substantial change. Not only had they, like many Academic Registries across the country, shouldered a substantial level of pressure through the pandemic (whilst they remained the face of the university supporting students who were trying to continue living and studying through massively disrupted months of university life), but critical functions such as timetabling were thrown up in the air overnight as a result of distance learning, pandemic bubbles, and room occupancy restrictions.

Whereas timetables had historically been planned more than nine months out of the start of term, Covid pushed functional experts into completely uncharted territory – highly complex work at a time when the student customer was at their most vulnerable. Many of the function's staff and some whole teams were drained, concerned about any future peaks in the virus and the impact on their work, while simultaneously aiming to provide students and their universities with the best possible service.

The work was commissioned at the point when whole team face-to-face working was being restored. Whilst some team members had been required to work on campus throughout the lockdown periods, some had not. Colleagues had been used to working together through virtual meetings. New appointments had been made to the Registry Management Team (RMT), including that of the Academic Registrar, as well as some staff turnover from the point of the first lockdown in March 2020. The Registrar was keen to ensure the team had the space and opportunity to storm, form, norm and perform through a pressurised moment in time, whilst successfully bringing disparate teams together and creating a shared sense of belonging.

Academic Registry is a core service of any university, and optimising performance was considered a strategic move and worthy of investment. The Academic Registrar asked SUMS Consulting to provide the Academic Registry Team with some bespoke Team and Individual Coaching, with the ultimate goal of defining clear objectives and ways of working that would enable team performance optimisation post the Covid-19 pandemic.

The framework

To initiate the assignment, SUMS carried out a preliminary team coaching exercise at the RMT's first in-person leadership team meeting. The lead Coaches were; Dr Marie Stopforth, an experienced academic, with a PhD in Psychology; and Vicky Denning, former Waitrose Ltd Board Member, and independent Coach and Consultant. Felicity Gasparro-Cooper, SUMS Associate Consultant, and Managing Consultant for Oyster Outcomes, led the assignment and liaison with the university.

Following this initial “discovery” exercise, SUMS with their partner Oyster Outcomes Ltd devised a modularised coaching programme for the Academic Registry Team. The Coaching Assignment was designed into five phases covering a 12 month time-frame as detailed below:

Phase	Objectives
Phase 1: Team Coaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To facilitate a period of reflection and enable physical team re-connection 2. To enable the team to articulate what worked well during the pandemic for Academic Registry, and what they would keep in ways of working for their function going forwards 3. To provide the opportunity for the RMT to hear more about the university's strategic priorities 4. To initiate the RMT's assimilation of new and proven ways of operating with the university's strategic overview, and start the process of considering how a future Academic Registry Function might be composed 5. To consolidate connections and relationships horizontally across the RMT, to enable a one Registry Team mentality to emerge
Phase 2: One-to-one Coaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To undertake one-to-one coaching with members of the senior leadership team (the Academic Registrar, Head of Assessments and Awards and Head of Programme Support) with a clear reflective focus on the outputs from Phase 1, and a 'strengths building' mentality 2. To establish the current ways of working between the teams, including an analysis of strengths and any areas for improvement 3. To create a vision of what a successful interface between the Academic Registry teams would comprise of 4. To consider how to approach Phase 3, based on key step guidance from the Coaches 5. To gain buy-in to leading focused work with teams and agreeing what successful outcomes would consist of
Phase 3: Wider Team Coaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To facilitate the connection of two teams who had worked together throughout the pandemic and facilitate progress of actions from Phase 1 2. To work together to specify any shared objectives and/or ways of working that would enable team performance optimisation during the agreed time horizon
Phase 4: Bespoke designed team teaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To work with specific specialist Academic Registry Teams to continue to build on the progress made with key stakeholders – exploring practical steps to build on recent progress and help develop a proactive supportive culture within the team 2. To encourage team members to embrace their role in providing confident, assured guidance to stakeholders (as well as each other) and understand their potential to contribute to wider team objectives. 3. To fully realise the agency available to Academic Registry to influence positive changes through policy and process development based on their experience of these processes 4. To reduce underlying frustrations with the potential to lead to tensions and limit progress
Phase 5: One-to-one coaching for team members	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 3 x one-to-one coaching sessions to enable Senior Administrative Officers to understand how they could develop further in their vital roles within the Academic Registry Team.

Feedback and benefits

Throughout the 12-month lifespan of the assignment, great progress was made. The benefits of taking a holistic and systemic approach to the Coaching work meant that every team member received an investment to their personal development. Not only did this allow the space to ‘storm, form, norm and perform’, but it enabled personal and team growth, as well as enabling greater collaboration between the distinctively different, but collegiate teams. This led to a more comprehensive and accessible team for both students and university colleagues.

Staff were surveyed throughout the Coaching modules using anonymous surveys to test efficacy of the programme, and some of the highlights included:

1. Adopting a positive mindset for the sessions, playing to strengths, and increasing confidence and motivation by reflecting on team and individual successes
2. ‘One Registry’ was a focus throughout the modules, resulting in a collective mission to enhance the whole team perspective. This enabled colleagues to explore what do Registry *really* do, and what is the function’s moral (and core) purpose?
3. Using the ‘Circles of influence’ model to explore ‘what’s stopping you?’ The RMT noted how many of those things were outside of their control, and came up with action points that they could control or influence
4. Members of the RMT were encouraged to take clear and relevant actions back to their teams, to enable functional progress which was relevant and appropriate to their area
5. The team worked together to build a vision for Academic Registry to 2030
6. Practical steps were taken to build on recent progress and help develop a proactive supportive culture within the team

Some key quotes from clients throughout the modules, which endorsed the Coaching work included:

“We had time to express our opinions on difficult work matters which helped us to move forward with these issues in a calm and professional manner.”

“Bringing the team together and giving them a space to discuss issues and resolve them practically helped improve the working of the team and build stronger relationships.”

“We were asked questions that we rarely used to think about our areas. It enabled us to think differently and really reflect on our work.”

“We were able to confirm how our Department works in the new structure and how we can benefit from talking more as a team to resolve the issues which come along with change.”

“Coaching resulted in team building and improved collective identity.”

“Coaching made us realise that we have more influence on change than first thought. Other areas within Registry face similar issues/concerns which means we can tackle these together.”

The lead sponsor of the work was pleased with the return gained from the investment made and would endorse further work of this nature.

In summary

The case in favour of Coaching being an important part of a university's personal development toolkit is clear, as are the circumstances at play in the sector in creating the need for optimal performance and staff agility, resilience, and focus. The positive management of performance is a critical success factor which will influence the ability of universities to withstand and excel in the winds of change, and successfully adapt to current and future themes.

Whether readers take a scientific view of the ROI from Coaching, or a more systemic, holistic view, the comprehensive work highlighted in the case-study, and the benefits directly derived by members of staff, and many more students and colleagues, is compelling.

SUMS continues to work with teams and individuals in member and non-member universities to enable them to ensure their people flourish, under extraordinarily pressurised circumstances. As part of our commitment to being leading experts on the successful management of change in the Higher Education Sector, we view our expertise in Coaching and Performance Development as an important complement in our comprehensive range of professional services.

If you would like support with Coaching, visit our [Coaching and Professional Development service page here](#) or start the conversation with [Principal Consultant Dr Fola Ikpehai](#) at o.o.ikpehai@reading.ac.uk.

Appendix

- [Fees for England universities frozen at £9,250 for two years - BBC News](#)
- [Home - Office for Students](#)
- [Impact of Covid on Recruitment and Admissions \(sums.org.uk\)](#)
- [Internationalisation agenda for universities: student recruitment \(icef.com\)](#)
- [Mental health negatively affecting almost 50% of UK students in survey - BBC News](#)
- [Tuesday briefing: What Rishi Sunak's plan to cut down on 'rip-off' courses actually means | Universities | The Guardian](#)
- [UCEA Open Letter - NUS UK](#)
- [University strikes: why staff are taking action | Times Higher Education \(THE\)](#)
- [Value for money - Office for Students](#)
- [What higher education students want from online learning | McKinsey](#)
- [Why does university research matter? \(universitiesuk.ac.uk\)](#)