

Personal and Professional Development Coaching for Researchers

What is coaching?

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) descriptor of coaching as ‘partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. The process of coaching often unlocks previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity and leadership.’

The benefits

1-2-1 coaching will support personal and professional development of university researchers (including but not exclusively Early Career Researchers) in a way that complements existing mentoring and internally provided CPD offers. It will contribute towards the personal and organisational objectives of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and the UK Government R and D People and Culture Strategy (2021), as well as align with elements of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework.

The evidence

The coaching project referred to in this document was undertaken with one Faculty at the University of Southampton in the summer of 2022. Twenty-three researchers expressed interested (EoI) in 1-2-1 coaching, each engaging in a coaching partnership of 2 or 3 x 60-minute sessions). Incredibly diverse themes came up across these partnerships (*Appendix 2*) and the benefits of coaching were uniquely experienced by all participants (*Appendix 1 and 3*) and witnessed more widely in their workplace settings.

Provision of coaching by digital means offered a scalable, responsive, and sustainable coaching solution **with long lasting personal and organisational benefits**. The coaching service included response to EoIs, matching coach to client, management of logistics, delivering coaching, and collation of feedback, all delivered within two months of the start of the project (in accordance with funding requirements).

Coaching was provided by experienced coaches, each with an understanding of the University context, and each with their own unique coaching style.

The Recommendation

The diversity of coaching themes and the feedback from the participants demonstrate **how high-quality coaching satisfies an unmet personal and professional development need**. This experience shows that there are benefits to coaching even over a short relationship (3 sessions) under a challenging time constraint. While reactive coaching solutions like this are valuable there is more to be gained by having a proactive, planned approach to using coaching to support researchers by integrating it into the CPD package available to them. Incorporating coaching as part of the training component in grant submissions would support a more planned approach.

The service provider

Dr Jeremy Hinks of Alpamayo Coaching Ltd, the senior coach, has considerable experience from several senior positions in academia, and works with coach associates and partner organisations to meet the scale and timelines of each project.

Please contact Jeremy using the details in the header to talk more about your needs, and where coaching might play a part in meeting them.

Participants said...

“Coaching can only have positive outcomes for the faculty and staff. The opportunity to talk to an independent coach has been invaluable to me, especially around career development and focus”

“We spend all day everyday with people very similar to us. We can get trapped in the same thought patterns and negative thinking as each other. Coaching let me challenge my own assumptions and thoughts, my mind feels more free”

“It is a quite unique experience that is potentially very helpful for people, quite distinct from mentoring or more 'normal' career development activities”

“We already have a great mentoring scheme, but I really enjoyed how the coach was not judgemental nor tried to direct me or give me simple answers but instead gave me space to talk and think about the solutions myself”

Appendix 1: Participant Feedback

Responses to the query – 'explain why coaching should be made more widely available in your Faculty'

1. This is a valuable experience for every person on the Faculty. Many of them are not aware it exists.
2. It is really helpful for self-awareness, well-being and professional relationships and even a single session can be very beneficial and eye opening.
3. Coaching provides an external lens against ongoing existing practices within the Faculty, so providing a means of identifying and eliminating embedded inefficiencies.
4. Because it increased my self-awareness by a notch. It will benefit ECRs to go about their work with intention.
5. Self-awareness is a key factor for everyone. Also, keeping yourself motivated is sometime a challenge. I believe these types of support are very useful for improving performance and output of staff.
6. Coaching should be made widely available in the faculty because it can help in identifying areas that have become our blind spot which are affecting happiness at work and/or career advancement
7. Encouraging learning and self-awareness by structured self-reflection, reducing anxiety and mental health pressure by increasing understanding of intrapersonal relationships, reducing mentoring pressure on existing academic senior staff.
8. It is a quite unique experience that is potentially very helpful for people, quite distinct from mentoring or more 'normal' career development activities.
9. I found the coaching session to be very useful to my career development and I expect it will be useful to other ECRs as well.
10. A way to discuss issues, concerns and aspirations in confidence outside of the management structure.
11. Face to face coaching makes certain available opportunities visible.
12. I think it is a good opportunity for taking some time to self-reflect and talk about things that you don't really discuss with your line manager or your colleagues.
13. People should be able to develop confidence and leadership for many more fruitful conversations and relationships within the faculty.
14. Coaching can only have positive outcomes for the faculty and staff. The opportunity to talk to an independent coach has been invaluable to me, especially around career development and focus.
15. We already have a great mentoring scheme, but I really enjoyed how the coach was not judgemental nor tried to direct me or give me simple answers but instead gave me space to talk and think about the solutions myself.
16. We spend all day everyday with people very similar to us. We can get trapped in the same thought patterns and negative thinking as each other. Coaching let me challenge my own assumptions and thoughts, my mind feels more free.

Appendix 2: Coaching themes

These themes came up during a project of 23 separate coaching partnerships.

Management of self	Interpersonal/ team/ systemic challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dealing with uncertainty ● Personal motivation, dealing with procrastination ● Mindset, for example reframing from 'what is not' to 'what is', or from blame to curiosity ● Managing the internal voice and emotional regulation ● Making time for reflection ● How to influence ● Stress management ● Managing mental, physical health and emotional upheaval (for example, bereavement) ● Confidence and ensuring your voice is heard, having the courage of your convictions ● Exploring the origin of habitual professional (and personal) behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding sector and organisational politics ● Dealing with cultural difference (international, employment sector <i>etc</i>) ● Making the most of the supervisor/ ECR relationship ● Coping with the competitive environment ● Developing trusting relationships, empowering and delegating to others ● Improving listening skills and open-ness to diversity in ideas ● Giving and responding to feedback ● Dealing with the perception that success in academia requires conforming to a certain stereotype ● Dealing with a perceived or actual lack of leadership or support
Skills Development	Career Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leadership and management skills ● Setting, managing and meeting expectations (with peers, supervisors and supervisees) ● Diversification vs specialisation ● Nurturing the development of junior staff ● Managing upwards ● Making the transition from dependency to individuality in terms of innovative ideas, and how to promote ideas to funding panels ● Managing my own wellbeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How to transition from ECR to full academic position without experience of competencies required to lead teams ● Work life balance ● Dealing with the toll of short-term contract on work and personal lives ● Academic vs industrial positions

