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Giving Voice to PhD Students Through Coaching: Making a Cultural Shift Towards a More Supportive Doctoral Journey

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Abstract

The doctoral journey, while intellectually enriching, is often marked by personal and professional challenges such as imposter syndrome, isolation, and difficulties with time management. Although supervision remains central to academic development, it does not always meet the broader developmental needs of PhD students. This study investigates the role of coaching as a complementary form of support, drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 15 doctoral students who have participated in coaching. Participants were drawn from a range of disciplines, enabling a cross-disciplinary perspective on coaching's efficacy within doctoral education. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and insights, supported by rigorous ethical and validation procedures to ensure the study's credibility. Findings indicate that coaching can enhance doctoral students' confidence, resilience, and overall well-being. While acknowledging certain limitations, the study offers a timely and evidence-informed contribution to the discourse on student support in higher education and considers the implications of integrating coaching into doctoral provision.

Thematic analysis of the data reveals key benefits, challenges, and recommendations for institutional integration of coaching in doctoral education. Findings suggest that coaching enhances confidence, goal-setting, and resilience while addressing gaps in traditional support structures.

Keywords: *Doctoral education, Coaching in higher education, culture shift, Academic resilience, Self-efficacy, Supervision and coaching, Transformational learning, Higher education*



Introduction

The pursuit of a PhD is an intellectually rigorous and often isolating experience. Research has highlighted the mental health challenges faced by doctoral candidates, with high levels of stress and attrition rates (Levecque et al., 2017). Traditional forms of support, such as supervision and mentoring, primarily focus on academic development rather than personal well-being (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011). Coaching, defined as a structured, facilitative process aimed at personal and professional growth (Passmore, 2010), has been proposed as a valuable intervention to support PhD students. This study examines the impact of coaching on doctoral candidates, drawing upon qualitative data to explore its benefits and challenges.

Coaching as a Support Mechanism for PhD Students

The role of coaching in higher education, particularly in the context of doctoral studies, has gained increasing recognition as a means of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by PhD students. Coaching provides a structured, developmental approach to supporting students in managing stress, overcoming self-doubt, and developing the necessary skills for academic and professional success (Brown-Wilsher & Dan-Ogosi, 2024). Intense intellectual demands, high levels of uncertainty, and significant emotional strain often characterise the PhD journey. Research has shown that doctoral students frequently experience challenges such as imposter syndrome, stress, difficulty managing workload, and a sense of isolation (Gardner, 2009; Levecque et al., 2017). Brown-Wilsher and Dan-Ogosi (2024) support this, arguing that coaching provides doctoral students with structured opportunities to reframe self-perceptions and build a more secure academic identity. Brown-Wilsher and Dan-Ogosi (2024) make a compelling case for the transformative potential of coaching in doctoral education. Their study explores the nuanced experiences of PhD students who have engaged with structured coaching interventions, identifying marked improvements in confidence, resilience, and clarity of purpose. Crucially, they argue that coaching provides a psychologically safe space for students to explore their identities, challenges, and ambitions without the evaluative dynamics often present in supervisory relationships. They reinforce the importance of viewing coaching not as a substitute for supervision, but as a distinct and complementary developmental resource (*ibid*). While supervision is embedded in the academic and methodological oversight of the research project, coaching, as Brown-Wilsher and Dan-Ogosi assert, is future-focused, non-directive, and centred on enhancing the student's sense of agency and capability. This distinction is critical to avoid conceptual or practical overlap between the two roles.

This aligns with Hughes (2020), who contends that while supervisors often focus on research progress and disciplinary knowledge, they are not always equipped or expected to attend to the personal, emotional, and strategic needs of their supervisees. Coaching addresses this gap by supporting students in navigating uncertainty, building resilience, and maintaining motivation throughout the doctoral process. Campbell and Gardner (2005) similarly emphasise the utility of coaching in enhancing goal clarity and reducing anxiety, particularly in relation to research deadlines and output expectations.

In addition, Brown-Wilsher and Dan-Ogosi (2024) highlight that coaching offers a space for students to critically reflect on their strengths and accomplishments, allowing them to move beyond self-doubt and embrace their evolving roles as researchers and scholars. This aligns with and supports that of McAlpine and Amundsen's (2012) work on academic identity development, which suggests that structured interventions, such as coaching, can accelerate the transition from student to independent scholar. While traditional supervisory support is intended to guide students through the research process, it often falls short in addressing the broader personal and professional development needs of PhD students (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012). Coaching has therefore emerged as a potential comple-

mentary support mechanism, offering a structured yet flexible approach to helping students navigate the complexities of doctoral education (Campbell & Gardner, 2005). Coaching differs from supervision and mentoring in that it is non-directive, student-centred, and focused on fostering autonomy and self-efficacy (Passmore, 2010). Whereas supervision is typically concerned with academic progress and research outcomes, coaching provides a holistic space for personal reflection, goal-setting, and skill development (Hughes, 2020).

Several theoretical frameworks underpin the use of coaching in doctoral education. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) posits that individuals are most motivated when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, all of which are cultivated through coaching. Unlike traditional forms of academic support that may impose rigid expectations, coaching allows PhD students to take ownership of their development, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and resilience. Similarly, Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (Neenan & Palmer, 2001) has been applied to doctoral support, offering structured techniques for identifying and reframing negative thought patterns, an approach particularly beneficial for students experiencing imposter syndrome or self-doubt. Another relevant framework is Mezirow's (1991) Transformational Learning Theory, which posits that deep learning occurs when individuals critically reflect on their assumptions and undergo shifts in perspective. Coaching facilitates this form of transformative learning by encouraging PhD students to critically examine their challenges and develop innovative approaches to addressing them.

A growing body of empirical research has examined the impact of coaching on PhD students. McCarthy et al. (2017) conducted a longitudinal study on PhD candidates who participated in structured coaching programmes, finding that students reported improved confidence, goal clarity, and a greater sense of control over their research journey. Similarly, Campbell and Gardner (2005) found that students who engaged in academic coaching experienced increased productivity and reduced anxiety about meeting deadlines. In a qualitative study by Devine et al. (2013), doctoral students who participated in coaching sessions reported enhanced resilience and an improved ability to manage setbacks. One of the key benefits highlighted in these studies is coaching's ability to foster a proactive mindset, enabling students to take a solution-oriented approach to challenges rather than feeling overwhelmed by them.

Among the most widely discussed challenges faced by PhD students is imposter syndrome the persistent belief that one is not competent despite evidence of ability (Clance & Imes, 1978). Research has demonstrated that coaching interventions can help students reframe self-doubt by developing strategies to recognise their achievements and challenge irrational beliefs (Lane, 2016). Additionally, work-life balance is a significant concern for many doctoral students, particularly those juggling research with teaching, employment, or family responsibilities (Levecque et al., 2017). Coaching provides structured support in time management, helping students set realistic goals and prioritise tasks effectively (Gyllenstein & Palmer, 2006). Another critical issue is the supervisor-student relationship, which plays a pivotal role in doctoral success (Ives & Rowley, 2005). While a positive supervisory relationship can be a source of academic and emotional support, poor supervision can exacerbate stress and uncertainty. Coaching offers a neutral space for students to reflect on their supervisory experience and develop communication strategies to navigate complex academic relationships (Hughes, 2020).

Despite its evident benefits, coaching is not yet a standardised component of doctoral education in many institutions. Some universities have introduced coaching initiatives, often as part of wider well-being or professional development programmes (Wisker, 2012). However, there are several barriers to implementation. One key challenge is the perception that coaching is remedial rather than developmental, leading to reluctance among students to engage with it (Grant, 2003). Additionally, resource constraints mean that coaching is often provided on a limited basis, with many students unaware of its availability (Hagen & Gavrilova Aguilar, 2012). There is also a lack of supervisor buy-in, as some academics view coaching as overlapping with or even undermining their role (McAlpine &

Amundsen, 2012). To address these challenges, scholars have recommended integrating coaching into formal doctoral training programmes rather than treating it as an optional service. For example, coaching could be embedded into structured milestone reviews, providing students with opportunities to engage in reflective practice alongside their academic work (Hughes, 2020). Furthermore, institutions could adopt a blended approach, offering a combination of one-to-one coaching, peer coaching, and online coaching resources to make support more accessible.

The literature suggests that coaching has significant potential to support PhD students by addressing challenges such as impostor syndrome, work-life balance, and supervisor relationships. Unlike traditional supervision, coaching provides a student-led space for reflection, goal-setting, and skill development, aligning with psychological theories of motivation and resilience. However, institutional barriers such as lack of awareness, resource constraints, and misconceptions about coaching's purpose continue to limit its widespread adoption. Future research should focus on the long-term impact of coaching on doctoral completion rates, career trajectories, and overall student well-being. Additionally, further studies are needed to explore how coaching can be tailored to diverse PhD cohorts, including part-time students, international students, and those in interdisciplinary fields. If higher education institutions are to support their doctoral students fully, coaching must be recognised not as an optional service but as an integral component of the doctoral experience.

Methodology and analysis

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the role of coaching as a support mechanism for PhD students. Given the complex and deeply personal nature of doctoral experiences, a qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of students' perceptions, challenges, and diversity of the impact of coaching on their academic and personal development. A semi-structured interview method was chosen as it provides flexibility, enabling participants to reflect on their experiences in depth while allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach ensures that the study captures both the commonalities and the unique aspects of each student's engagement with coaching.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that those involved had direct experience with coaching during their PhD journey. See the table below that indicates their contribution to the final themes, their gender and level of study and those who have completed their doctoral journey.

A total of 15 doctoral students from various disciplines across UK universities participated in the study. To be eligible, participants had to be either currently enrolled in a PhD programme or have completed their PhD within the past two years. Additionally, all participants had engaged in at least three coaching sessions as part of their doctoral journey, either through university-run coaching programmes, independent professional coaching services, or informal coaching relationships. Of the students recruited, there were two students who had completed their studies, two were in the first year, six were in the second year, and five students were in the third year of studies. It should also be mentioned that all of the participants were part-time students. The aim was to recruit participants from diverse disciplines, ensuring that the study captured a broad range of coaching experiences, reflecting the varying challenges faced across different academic fields, which was a success. Participants were identified through university coaching initiatives, academic networks, and coaching organisations that support doctoral students.

Table 1

	Enhancing confidence and self-efficacy N=15	Emotional and stress management N=11	Academic identity and motivation N=7	Interaction between coaching and supervision N=3	Need for structured coaching integration N=14	Gender	Year of study
1	X	X			X	F	1
2	X	X	X			F	3
3	X	X	X	X	X	F	2
4	X	X	X		X	F	3
5	X	X			X	F	3
6	X	X			X	F	2
7	X		X		X	F	2
8	X	X			X	F	3
9	X		X	X	X	F	2
10	X	X			X	F	2
11	X		X		X	F	3
12	X				X	F	2
13	X	X			X	F	Completed
14	X	X		X	X	M	1
15	X	X	X		X	M	Completed

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. These interviews were carried out via video conferencing platforms to maximise accessibility and convenience for participants. Key questions included:

- What prompted you to engage in coaching during your PhD?"
- How would you describe the role of coaching in your academic and personal development?
- Can you share an instance where coaching helped you overcome a specific challenge?
- How did coaching influence your confidence, motivation, and ability to manage stress?

The interviews also explored participants' perspectives on coaching's strengths and limitations and their suggestions for improving coaching provision within doctoral education. All interviews were recorded with consent via Microsoft Teams and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy, ensuring that their responses were accurately represented.

To analyse the data, thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage framework. The process involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns across qualitative datasets. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were used. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge organi-

cally from participants' narratives, while deductive coding was guided by existing literature on coaching, doctoral student well-being, and academic support mechanisms.

To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, several measures were undertaken. Member checking was conducted, whereby participants were provided with preliminary findings and given the opportunity to verify or clarify interpretations. This ensured that the results accurately reflected their lived experiences. Additionally, peer debriefing was employed, involving discussions with fellow researchers to ensure analytical rigour and coherence. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher keeping a reflective journal to document potential biases and preconceptions that could influence data interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These strategies contributed to the reliability and validity of the study's findings.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained, and participants provided informed consent, which detailed the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and any identifying details were removed from the transcripts. All data were securely stored on and password protected, which was only accessible to me, the researcher. These ethical precautions ensured that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly and that their data were handled with sensitivity and responsibility.

While this study provides qualitative insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size means that findings may not be generalisable to all PhD students, particularly those in different cultural or institutional contexts. Additionally, self-selection bias may be present, as students who chose to participate may have had particularly positive (or negative) experiences with coaching, potentially skewing the results. Another limitation is researcher positionality, as personal assumptions about coaching's effectiveness could inadvertently shape data interpretation. To mitigate this, reflexivity and peer validation were employed throughout the research process. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative measures such as surveys to triangulate findings and assess coaching's impact on PhD students' academic progress, well-being, and completion rates.

To gain a deeper understanding of how coaching supports doctoral students, a thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data. This approach enabled the identification of patterns and shared experiences across a diverse group of participants, each of whom had engaged with coaching during their PhD journey. The analysis focused on capturing both the individual and collective meanings embedded in the participants' narratives, with attention to the psychological, emotional, and academic dimensions of their experiences. The themes that emerged provide insight into the multifaceted impact of coaching on doctoral development and highlight areas where coaching complements existing forms of institutional support, such as supervision, team, and other academic support available.

While the coaching journey was described in diverse ways, each theme is discussed separately. It is important to recognise the interconnectedness of these areas, as participants often spoke of overlapping benefits and challenges. The following analysis begins with one of the most consistently reported outcomes of coaching, the enhancement of confidence and self-efficacy. This theme captures how coaching supported participants in navigating internal doubts and in developing a stronger sense of self. During the interview, all of the participants reported that coaching helped them overcome self-doubt and imposter syndrome, enabling them to engage more effectively with their research at some point during the discussion. They also noted that, before coaching, they often questioned their academic abilities and legitimacy within their field. One of the participants explained, *"Before coaching, I constantly doubted whether I belonged in academia. My coach helped me see my strengths and reminded me why I was chosen for this PhD."* This aligns with existing research that highlights coaching's effectiveness in encouraging self-belief and combating imposter syndrome among doctoral students (Clance & Imes, 1978; Lane, 2016). The impact of coaching was particularly pronounced in the context of public engagement and research dissemination, as eleven of the students described how coaching empowered them to pres-

ent at conferences and publish their work with greater confidence. One participant reflected, *"My coach worked with me on impostor feelings, and I went from avoiding conference presentations to delivering my first keynote."* These findings support Grant's (2003) argument that coaching enhances self-directed learning and goal attainment in academic settings.

Another major theme was the role of coaching in emotional resilience and stress management, particularly in relation to the pressures of doctoral study in which all of the participants alluded to. They acknowledged that their PhD journey had been marked by periods of intense stress and anxiety, often exacerbated by the isolated nature of doctoral research. Coaching provided a structured space for students to explore coping strategies and develop emotional resilience. One participant shared, *"The stress of deadlines and feedback used to overwhelm me, but through coaching, I developed techniques to break tasks down and manage my emotions better."* This finding resonates with Gyllensten and Palmer's (2006) argument that coaching serves as an effective intervention for managing work-related stress in high-performance environments. Similar to the above theme, all of the participants also emphasised how coaching helped them reframe failure and setbacks, particularly when dealing with rejected journal submissions or critical feedback from supervisors. One student noted, *"Instead of spiralling into self-doubt, my coach helped me see rejection as an opportunity to improve my work."* This supports Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, which highlights the role of external support in encouraging resilience and intrinsic motivation.

Closely related to confidence and resilience was the theme of academic identity and motivation. Seven of the participants shared how coaching helped them define their professional goals and see themselves as emerging academics rather than merely as PhD students. One of the younger and early on in the doctoral journey reflected, *"I had never thought of myself as an academic, but my coaching sessions helped me visualise my future in research and teaching."* This aligns with McAlpine and Amundsen's (2012) work, which suggests that doctoral identity development is a dynamic process that benefits from structured reflection and external guidance. Coaching also played a critical role in sustaining motivation, particularly for students who had experienced periods of stagnation or disengagement. During the interview, the majority (twelve) of the participants reported that the coaching sessions have helped them to come to a realisation and to recognise how they can break their research into manageable milestones, creating a sense of progress and momentum. One student shared, *"I was stuck in a cycle of procrastination, but coaching helped me break my research into manageable steps and stay accountable."* This supports Devine, Meyers, and Houssemand's (2013) assertion that coaching enhances goal-setting and sustained academic engagement.

An additional, and somewhat unexpected, theme was the interaction between coaching and doctoral supervision. While all students viewed coaching as a complementary support system, three noted that tensions occasionally arose between the guidance provided by their coach and that offered by their supervisor. One student described their experience, stating, *"My supervisor was supportive, but our interactions were very research-focused. Coaching provided a space to discuss the emotional and strategic aspects of the PhD, which supervision lacked."* This highlights the distinction between the academic guidance supervisors provide and the broader personal and professional development facilitated by coaching. However, a few participants reported moments of misalignment when their coach and supervisor offered conflicting advice, particularly regarding time management and work-life balance. One participant explained, *"My coach helped me to realise my key priorities and to prioritise self-care and ensure work-life balance, but my supervisor expected constant productivity."* This finding supports Hughes' (2020) argument that while coaching can be a valuable addition to doctoral education, clearer institutional frameworks are needed to ensure that coaching and supervision work synergistically rather than in opposition.

The final major theme to emerge from the data was the need for structured coaching integration within doctoral education. All but one of the participants expressed concern that access to coaching remained informal and inconsistent, with students often having to seek coaching independently rather

than it being a standard component of PhD support structures. One participant remarked, *"I only found out about coaching through a peer. It should be something universities actively offer to all PhD students."* There was a consensus among participants that coaching should be embedded within doctoral training programmes, particularly at key transition points such as the first year of study, the mid-PhD stage, and thesis completion. They suggested that universities should develop structured coaching initiatives, ensuring that all PhD candidates have equal access to coaching as a means of support. These perspectives align with McCarthy et al.'s (2017) argument that coaching should be formally positioned within higher education as a systematic and institutionally recognised academic support mechanism.

In summary, the analysis reveals that coaching plays a crucial role in enhancing confidence, resilience, motivation, and academic identity among PhD students. Participants consistently described coaching as a transformative experience that provided them with practical strategies, emotional support, and a sense of direction throughout their doctoral journey. However, findings also highlight tensions between coaching and supervisory guidance, as well as the need for more structured and accessible coaching provisions within universities. These insights underscore the necessity for higher education institutions to recognise the value of coaching and integrate it as a formalised support mechanism within doctoral education.

This study has demonstrated that coaching is a valuable support mechanism for PhD students, addressing key challenges such as impostor syndrome, emotional resilience, motivation, and academic identity development. The analysis of interview data revealed that coaching not only enhances self-efficacy but also equips students with practical strategies for managing stress, overcoming setbacks, and maintaining focus on long-term goals. These findings are consistent with existing literature, highlighting the benefits of coaching in fostering personal and professional growth within academic environments (Grant, 2003; Hughes, 2020; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012).

One of the most significant insights from this study is the role of coaching in bridging the gap between academic supervision and personal development. While supervision is essential for guiding the intellectual and methodological aspects of doctoral research, coaching provides a distinct but complementary form of support that helps students navigate the psychological and strategic dimensions of the PhD journey. However, tensions between coaching and supervisory expectations were evident in some cases, suggesting that clearer institutional frameworks are needed to ensure these two forms of support work in alignment rather than conflict.

A further critical finding is the unequal access to coaching within doctoral education. Many participants discovered coaching through informal networks rather than university-provided resources, indicating a need for greater institutional commitment to structured coaching provision. Given doctoral students' well-documented challenges, including high stress levels, isolation, and attrition, universities should consider embedding coaching into existing PhD support structures. This could include offering coaching as part of induction programmes, integrating it into personal development planning, or establishing dedicated coaching services for PhD students. Despite its benefits, access to coaching remains uneven across institutions. Brown-Wilsher and Dan-Ogosi (2024) argue that many PhD students only encounter coaching through informal networks or self-directed initiatives, limiting its potential impact. This echoes concerns raised by previous researchers, who note that the lack of institutional recognition for coaching in higher education creates disparities in student support (McCarthy et al., 2017).

Overall, this study underscores the importance of recognising coaching as a legitimate and necessary component of doctoral education. Coaching can enhance both academic performance and overall well-being by providing students with structured opportunities for reflection, goal-setting, and resilience-building. Future research could explore the long-term impact of coaching on doctoral completion rates, career progression, and research productivity, further strengthening the case for its institutionalisation within higher education.

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