RESEARCH ARTICLE:

The Role of Academic Researcher Coaching in Enhancing Innovation and Knowledge Production in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa

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Abstract

Perhaps the most significant global impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it has catalysed accelerated innovation and change across various sectors. Businesses have had to pivot and innovate to survive in the "new normal", medical and health care industries have had to adapt rapidly in order to stay ahead of the growing global health crisis brought on by the pandemic, and governments have had to think out of the box to manage the political, social and economic challenges engendered by Covid-19. Amidst all of this, the Higher Education sector has also been forced to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic. In the South African context, innovation in higher education has focused mostly on teaching and learning, specifically the accelerated shift from traditional face-to-face teaching to the use of online learning platforms. However, what has been neglected is innovation in knowledge production and research. This article explores the role of academic researcher coaching as a support mechanism to enhance innovation and knowledge production through postgraduate academic research. It is argued that academic researcher coaching will become an increasingly valuable tool to provide holistic support to researchers, and that complements the traditional research supervisor role.

Introduction

There is no sector, whether globally or locally, that has been unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Higher Education sector is no exception. The International Association of Universities published a Global Survey Report in 2020, detailing the impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education around the world. In the report, it was found, among other things, that 'Almost all [Higher Education] institutions that replied to the survey…have been impacted by Covid-19: 59% of them replied that all campus activities have stopped, and the institution is completely closed.' (Marinoni, Van't Land and Jensen, 2020: 11). In similar vein, Rashid and Yadav (2020: 340) have argued that the pandemic has 'caused a huge impact on the higher education system', and that it has 'exposed the shortcomings of the current higher education system.' Higher Education in the African context was also not spared the negative impact of Covid-19. According to ACCORD (2020), the pandemic has brought 'unprecedented disruption and uncertainty to universities in Africa.'

An equally bleak picture is painted by Mugo, Odera and Wachira (2020: n.p.), who state that 'We know that the state of research and higher education on the [African] continent has long been a cause for concern even before the Covid-19 crisis and early indications show that the virus is exacerbating these vulnerabilities.' In South Africa, HEIs continue to battle the impact of Covid-19 on their core academic activities, including teaching and research. Arguably the most significant impact of the pandemic is on the financial sustainability of HEIs. According to Koornhof

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(2020), universities in South Africa have been under financial pressure for some time, but this has been exacerbated by the pandemic. In addition to the financial impact, there is also the impact of the Covid-19 restrictions and regulations that have had a direct impact on teaching and research activities. In March 2021, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, published a new national framework designed to prepare South African HEIs for the 2021 academic year. This framework included the need for HEIs to continue to implement restrictions and regulations aimed at mitigating health and safety risks to staff and students (Staff Writer, 2021: n.p.).

From the above, HEIs in South Africa, and indeed globally, will have to adapt and change in order to cope with the new conditions created by the pandemic. It is within this context of transition and adaptability that this article focuses on the role of academic researcher coaching as a viable strategy in enhancing research and knowledge production, particularly in South African HEIs.

Understanding Coaching

In the South African Higher Education context, the use of academic coaching is still relatively new, especially when compared to the use of coaching in academic institutions overseas. Robinson (2015), and Bettingee and Baker (2011) concur that 'academic success coaching' emerged in US academic institutions in the 2000s and began as a strategy by HEIs to improve their student retention rates. Subsequently, many institutions proceeded to create their own 'in-house coaching services' leading to the proliferation of several coaching programmes across the US (Robinson, 2015: 1). Academic coaching in US institutions of higher learning have been found to be effective. Capstick, Harrell-Williams, Cockrum and West (2019) conducted a study exploring the effectiveness of academic coaching for academically at-risk college students. The study focused on the impact of the Academic Coaching for Excellence (ACE) programme for academically at-risk students, both part-time and full-time. The study found that those students who participated in the coaching programme experienced 'significant' Grade Point Average (GPA) increases, and that they were more likely to be retained by the university compared to those students who did not participate in the programme.

Outside of the US coaching has also been incorporated to improve success rates in HEIs. For example, in both Israel (Ben-Yehuda, 2015) and Oman (Hakro and Mathew, 2020), coaching was used to improve the performance not only of students, but also of staff. So critical has the role of coaching become in HEIs overseas, that Hakro and Mathew (2020: 307) state that universities and HEIs are 'increasingly recognizing the value of coaching for professional and organizational development.' Various studies on the use and effectiveness of coaching in higher education have been conducted in other countries as well. For example, studies have been done in Korea (Byun, Sung, Park and Choi, 2018), Pakistan (Azeem, Ahmad, Hussain and Nafees, 2021), India (Orberg, 2018), Brazil (Galatti, Dos Santos and Korsakas, 2018), Australia (Whipp and Pengelley, 2017), and Malaysia (Hussain, 2020).

But what exactly is coaching, and more specifically, *academic* coaching? According to the International Coaching Federation (ICF) (2021: n.p.), coaching can be defined 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.'

In similar vein, coaching can be understood as

> 'a collaborative helping relationship, where coach and client (coachee) engage in a systematic process of setting goals and developing solutions with the aim of facilitating goal attainment, self-directed learning, and personal growth of

the coachee.' (Losch, Traut-Mattausch, Mühlberger and Jonas, 2016: n.p.; see also Grant, 2013).

From the above, it is evident that coaching is a *partnership* between coach and coachee, based on *collaboration* and *relationship.* The partnership is goal-directed and focused on achieving specific outcomes. Emphasis is placed on the coaching process, which, as indicated in the ICF's definition, is thought-provoking and creative. In other words, coaching enables the coachee to tap into his/her creativity to develop solutions to challenges through critical introspection, clarification of goals and creating a strategy to achieve the desired outcomes. When the above is applied within an academic context, we can speak of academic coaching. Deiorio, Carney, Kahl, Bonura and Juve (2016) defined academic coaching as the facilitation of learners achieving their fullest potential, mainly through evaluating their performance, assisting them to identify needs, to develop a plan to achieve those needs, and finally to help the learner to be accountable. Hence, academic coaching is a partnership between coach and coachee that is designed to facilitate academic performance at the highest level.

As stated previously, in South Africa, the use and value of academic coaching in higher education is an under-researched topic. Supporting this notion is Le Roux (2018), who argued that, in the South African context, there is limited research on the experiences of postgraduate students trying to navigate the roles of work, studies and personal life. She further argues that even less is known about the impact of coaching as a supportive intervention for postgraduate students. By means of a case study, focusing on ten university postgraduate students who were invited to participate in a coaching programme for a five-month period, Le Roux (2018) found that there was a level of incompatibility between work, study, and personal life, if these were not supported by some kind of intervention. Consequently, coaching, as a supportive mechanism, encouraged self-reflection and problem-solving, mainly through the coaching conversations between coach and student.

The ideas purported by Le Roux (2018) echo those expressed by Geber (2009), almost a decade earlier. According to Geber (2009: 674), 'Entry into an academic career is often an arduous process.' This suggests that supportive interventions are not only valuable for postgraduate students, but also for those wishing to embark on an academic career. Some of the challenges that early career academics face include difficulty in completing their studies in a timeous manner, as well as subsequent publication in peer-reviewed books and/or journals. Thus, Geber (2009: 674) argued, coaching and mentoring are 'necessary for enabling aspirant academics to establish successful careers.'

From the above, both the international and local scholarship agree that coaching is indeed a vital resource for successful academic performance in general. However, what is the value of research coaching specifically for the academic context?

Researcher Coaching in the Academic Context

When academic coaching is applied to research, this is where there can be much scope for innovation in academic research and knowledge production. Academic researcher coaching is arguably an effective way to enhance research innovation and knowledge production in the academic context.

As suggested above, academic coaching in general is still relatively under-developed in South African HEIs, thus it stands to reason that academic researcher coaching is much the same. While academic coaching can broadly refer to a range of coaching interventions impacting on teaching and learning, researcher coaching specifically focuses on research-related activities. Furthermore, the primary candidates for researcher coaching would ideally be postgraduate research students, as well as early- to mid-career academics. As Geber (2009) mentioned above, starting an academic career is fraught with numerous challenges, and coaching support can be a

valuable tool in enabling young academics to build successful careers. In addition, though, it can also be argued that research coaching specifically can help young academics to develop their research skills and competencies in various ways, thereby building their confidence, and encouraging innovative and creative thinking.

In the UK, researcher coaching is provided as a professional development coaching and consultancy service to the Higher Education Sector. An organisation known as Research Coach, provides coaching and consultancy services to academic researchers and higher education professionals. Specifically, the organisation aims to use coaching to assist its clients in three ways:

- To find solutions to professional challenges
- To identify and achieve meaningful development goals
- To explore new ideas and perspectives (Research Coach Limited, 2021)

Similarly, another researcher coaching organisation, this time based in the US, also focuses on providing holistic support to academic researchers and scientists. The organisation, known as Still Point Coaching and Consulting (2021), provides an 'eclectic approach to help [their] clients set and achieve their goals, using proven strategies drawn from the fields of executive coaching, consulting, and training.' In particular, the organisation assists researchers in the following ways:

- Improve their management and leadership skills
- Publish more quickly and successfully in journals such as Nature, Science, and Cell
- Upgrade their communications skills
- Significantly enhance their productivity
- Improve the social, political, and diplomatic skills necessary to succeed at the highest levels

What is immediately noticeable from the above two examples, is that researcher coaching is more holistic than merely only focusing on research *per se.* Researcher coaching involves helping the academic researcher to get clear on various interrelated aspects, all of which can impact on innovation and creativity. Aspects such as goal setting and achievement, time and self-management, overcoming challenges, developing leadership and communication skills, as well as addressing mindset/emotional blocks are typical issues that coaching would address. In addition, addressing these aspects within the context of their impact on core research activities such as publishing, presentation of research findings, grant applications and even generating new ideas and knowledge demonstrates the immense value that coaching can provide for academic researchers. In these ways coaching can even enhance the researcher's ability to be innovative and creative in the research endeavour.

Some would perhaps argue that researcher coaching is no different to research supervision. However, while there may be similarities between coaching and supervision, there are several key distinctions that need to be considered.

Key Differences between Academic Researcher Coaching and Research Supervision

Research supervision is a well-established practice in academic research. It is also fundamental to the development of skilled and competent researchers. Both Lee (2007) and Barnett (2000) are of the opinion that research supervisors play a key role in educating researchers in an age of super complexity. Furthermore, 'uncertainty in our environment means we need to increase the amount of revolutionary research, as opposed to norm-endorsing research...' (Lee, 2007: 680; Barnett, 2000). This suggests that supervisors are critical in the development and training of researchers to enable them to produce creative and innovative research.

However, over the last two decades, research supervision seems to have changed in response to a variety of factors. Indeed, it has been argued that 'Research supervision is fluid and is

determined by continuity and change.' (Grant, Hackney, and Edgar, 2014: 44). Various scholars, including McCallin and Nayar (2012: 63), have argued that 'Research supervision has changed significantly in recent years.' Among the factors that have led to these changes are changes in funding and the delivery of research programmes at university level. Consequently, the changes in research supervision have caused governments to 'scrutinise the purpose of higher education and the attributes and capabilities research graduates have for the workplace.' (McCallin and Nayar, 2012: 63). In other words, the changing demands of the workplace environment have necessitated the need for research supervision to be responsive to these demands, in order for research programmes to remain relevant. This pressure is exacerbated if one considers the impact of government and other external forms of funding on research programmes. Thus, supervisors now find themselves having to manage these and other complex issues in a highly contestable funding environment (Green and Usher, 2003; Manathunga, 2005; Sampson and Comer, 2010; McCallin and Nayar, 2012).

Like coaching, research supervision is also based on a collaborative relationship between supervisor and student, with the aim of producing a specific outcome. According to Kam (1997: 81), research supervision can be defined as 'a bi-lateral process, a complex interaction between the supervisor and student.' Kam adds that 'This interaction plays a significant role in affecting the quality of the supervisory process.' (1997: 81). This conceptualisation of supervision echoes the definitions of coaching as proposed by the ICF, as well as Losch *et al.* (2016) briefly outlined earlier. Supervision is also based on a partnership process that seeks to encourage the student to think critically and creatively about the research endeavour, developing solutions to complex challenges, and ultimately achieving a specific outcome, namely the research report, dissertation, or thesis. Grant *et al.* (2014: 54) make the similarities between supervision and coaching even more explicit in their use of the metaphor of the 'coach' to describe the perceived role of the supervisor. In their study, they found that some participants preferred to use the terms 'critical friend or a coach', rather than 'supervisor'. The latter, they argued, gave the 'wrong impression' as it suggested 'control and monitoring', rather than what was the actual role of the supervisor, namely, to give his/her 'experience and knowledge of problems', as well as to 'advise solutions that were appropriate to the limitations and the capabilities of the student.' These views of the role of a research supervisor echo that of the coach, which is to act as a guide or advisor to helping the coachee to achieve a specific outcome.

While on the surface it may appear that supervision and coaching may be similar, there are, however, certain key differences that need to be considered:

Supervision focuses exclusively on the academic and research component, while coaching is more holistic

As important as supervision is in the successful completion of a postgraduate student's research study, it does have certain limitations. One of the potential challenges that postgraduate students grapple with is work/life balance, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the expectations of academic life. Non-academic working professionals pursuing postgraduate research qualifications are most prone to experiencing these kinds of challenges. However, according to Le Roux (2018), supervisors cannot fulfil the role of coaching their students through challenges involving personal life stressors and conflicts, mainly because they are neither equipped, nor comfortable, with addressing such issues with their students. There is usually a clear boundary in academia between what the supervisor can address, and what he/she may regard as beyond the scope of supervision. In most cases, what falls within the realm of supervision is the exclusive focus on the academic component. Outside of this, the supervisor's impact is somewhat limited.

Coaching, on the other hand, is not restricted to only focusing on the academic progress of the student. A coach realises that academic progress can be affected by a range of issues, many of which may not be directly related to the academic work of the student, but that could have a significant impact. As mentioned above, challenges related to work/life balance, or

personal/professional conflicts, are external issues that could impact on academic performance. Mindset challenges such as limiting beliefs, anxiety, stress, procrastination, time management, and others are typically issues that fall outside of the influence of the supervisor. Coaches, however, can address these issues directly and equip the coachee with the skills and strategies necessary to overcome these kinds of challenges.

Supervision seeks to solve problems/challenges of the supervisee, coaching seeks to help the coachee to develop the confidence to solve his/her own problems

Since the supervisor restricts his/her role predominantly to the academic context, supervision aims to help the student to resolve any academic-related issues that are directly relevant to the student's research. Thus, the supervisor would focus on providing the student with solutions to any obstacles encountered during any phase of the research process.

By contrast, the coach focuses on helping the student to build his/her capacity and skills, in order to develop the confidence, resourcefulness and creativity to find his/her own solutions to whatever challenges are encountered. As stated previously, the supervisor is mainly concerned with the academic progress of the student, while the coach takes a more holistic perspective, also including the impact of personal and other factors, outside of the academic, that could affect the student's progress. One of the mindset/personal challenges that could hamper progress is uncertainty and/or anxiety caused by lack of confidence. Postgraduate research is largely independent, meaning that the student needs to have the confidence and skills to work on his/her own, with little external help or support, save that coming from the supervisor. Those who may experience problems and obstacles in their personal lives may not get the required assistance or support from their supervisor, meaning that they must rely on their own problem-solving skills to overcome these challenges. Coaching support can help the student to develop the necessary problem-solving skills, thereby enabling him/her to build confidence in their ability to overcome obstacles that the supervisor may not be able to address.

Supervision support ends once the student graduates, while coaching support can continue indefinitely depending on the needs of the coachee

Supervision has one specific outcome, namely the successful completion of a postgraduate student's research qualification. Once this is achieved, then the supervision process officially ends, barring a few administrative details. If the postgraduate student decides to enter academia as an early-career academic researcher, the supervisor will likely play no further role in the student's continuing development. Coaching, on the other hand, is an ongoing supportive process. Once a coachee has successfully achieved an identified outcome or goal, the next step is to shift focus to the next goal in order to ensure personal and/or professional development. If the coachee is pleased with the results obtained while working with a coach, he/she may choose to continue the coaching partnership. In fact, the coachee may decide to continue working with the coach indefinitely. Thus, the coach continues to play a role in the life of the coachee, regardless of his/her achievements.

Despite these important differences, academic research coaching should not be viewed as a replacement for traditional research supervision but should rather be viewed as a valuable complement to supervision. The argument by Lee (2007) and Barnett (2000) outlined previously suggests that supervision remains a key role in producing innovative research. However, it was also shown that supervision does have certain limitations that could directly impact on the ability of research students to be creative and innovative, especially if they are impacted by challenges that fall outside the scope of traditional research supervision. It is here where coaching can add much value to the supervision process by providing the needed support and guidance where supervision may be unable to.

> ***A supervisor can become a research mentor to a researcher due to the supervisor's experience and expertise in academic research, while a coach does not need to be directly involved in the field of research of the student in order to be an effective coach, nor even be an academic***

This speaks to the inherent differences between mentoring and coaching. While the terms *coach* and *mentor* are often used interchangeably, this may lead to confusion of what each role entails. This confusion may be exacerbated due to the similarities between coaching and mentorship, as well as the possibility that someone can be both a coach and a mentor. However, there is an important distinction. According to Durham (2020: n.p.), 'A mentor assists a less experienced person by providing…guidance…and insight *into a specific field in which they [the mentor] are experienced.*' [author's emphasis]. Mentorship is primarily development driven and focuses on the long-term results and development of the mentee. By contrast, coaching is concerned with the present, the here-and-now. Consequently, 'coaching is performance driven and usually entails short term goals that are actively worked towards to achieve a specific aim.' (Durham, 2020: n.p.). While a mentor may advise and guide by relying on their own experience, a coach does not necessarily need to be experienced in the same field as the coachee, as it is not the coach's experience in a particular academic field that assists the coachee, but rather the coach's use of coaching skills to draw the creativity, resourcefulness, and solutions from the coachee, by leveraging the coachee's *own experience, skills and motivation*. A research supervisor may thus be more effective as a mentor due to his/her academic experience in the same field of knowledge or academic discipline of the student, as well as the experience of having gone through the research process relevant to that field or area of research. The coach, by contrast, does not require an in-depth knowledge or experience in the student's academic field to be effective, due to the coach's emphasis on non-academic aspects such as mindset, life skills, clarity of vision, direction and focus, and performance.

One possible concern that may arise for a young researcher who chooses to work with both a supervisor/mentor and a coach, may be the perceived confusion or conflict for the researcher involved. There actually is no confusion or conflict because of the two very different ways in which both the supervisor/mentor and the coach can contribute to the researcher's growth and development. Since the coach is not an academic expert in the relevant field of the researcher or supervisor, there is no potential for "stepping on toes" of the supervisor. Thus, the researcher need not fear being caught in between the supervisor and the coach. These two roles should thus be viewed as complementary rather than being in opposition. In fact, a researcher who is able to leverage the support of both a supervisor/mentor, as well as a coach, will significantly accelerate his/her progress as an emerging researcher.

The Value of Coaching for Innovation in Knowledge Production

There can be little doubt that innovation and knowledge production are two fundamental functions of academic research in Higher Education. Knowledge is critical, and innovative knowledge even more so, particularly in a world undergoing rapid change. While much of the focus currently is on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the wide-ranging changes that it has wrought globally, the truth is that global changes have been going on at a rapid pace since World War Two. In fact, Philipson (2020) states that we are currently experiencing a 'full-blown globalization' that has created, and continues to create significant and substantial transformations politically, socially, economically, and culturally, that generate challenges and problems that, in turn, require more creative and innovative solutions to resolve. And now, with the Covid-19 pandemic, innovation in knowledge production has become more important than ever.

Within this context of the dual challenges of both globalisation and Covid-19, academic research in higher education needs to be even more focused on producing creative and innovative solutions to the challenges confronting society. However, Bastalich (2017), referring to the

'problem of [academic research] supervision', argued that the decontextualised, psychological lens dominating educational thought about research innovation, necessitated 'a greater emphasis on content and context learning', particularly at the level of doctoral education and supervision. This argument was made three years before the onset of the pandemic. It could be argued that this point is even more salient now as we experience the challenges of living with a global pandemic. Hence, producing academic research that is relevant and context-specific is key to not only producing relevant doctoral graduates, but to producing thinkers and problem-solvers who have the capacity to generate creative and innovative knowledge and solutions.

What value can academic research coaching provide for creative knowledge production and/or context-specific innovation? Throughout this discussion, some ideas in response to this question have been outlined. Coaching approaches academic research in a holistic way, meaning that it not only focuses on the academic side of the individual's development, but also on other equally important dimensions. In order to create innovative knowledge producers, it is necessary to first help them to build their confidence in their own ability to be innovative problem-solvers. As discussed earlier, research students may face various challenges that do not only include those of an academic nature but could also include their own personal mental/emotional blocks, such as limiting beliefs, lack of confidence, anxiety, self-doubt, interpersonal relationship issues, lack of adequate skills, not having a clear vision and direction, and various others. Through the use of coaching to address these aspects, the individual develops the confidence, skills and clarity of vision and direction required to become a creative problem-solver. If he/she can use the skills gained through coaching to creatively solve their own problems, that can easily translate into them using those same skills, combined with their specific scientific, disciplinary or research expertise, to develop innovative solutions to wider societal challenges. Concepts such as *independent thinking* and *critical thinking* are often taken for granted in the higher education environment, but in coaching these are the fundamental building blocks of out of the box thinking, the very kind of thinking required for innovative knowledge production.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the need for academic research coaching as a valuable tool in enhancing innovation and knowledge production in higher education institutions. With reference to both postgraduate research, as well as research done by junior academic staff, it was argued that coaching can potentially fast track the production of knowledge, especially within social sciences and humanities research. While coaching has been used extensively within academic institutions overseas, in the South African context however, it is still an underutilised resource. The pandemic has forced academic institutions to consider new tools, techniques, and strategies to maintain their relevance for the current context. Hence, it is argued that more extensive use of coaching should become the norm rather than the exception. By incorporating coaching as a key resource, South African academic institutions will undoubtedly experience major positive shifts in productivity and output, particularly in research.

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