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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Exploring the lived experience of mature Ph.D. students receiving one-to-one coaching sessions during their Ph.D. journey

Martine George ^{a,b} and Ruth Hughes ^c

^aSolvay Lifelong Learning, Solvay Brussels School of Economics & Management, Brussels, Belgium; ^bICHEC School of Management, Brussels, Belgium; ^cDepartment of Psychology, University of East London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study examines the lived experience of mature Ph.D. students engaging in one-to-one coaching sessions. Four participants at Danish universities in the last 18 months of their Ph.D. journey received a minimum of five individual coaching sessions provided by the same coach. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed the emergence of three themes: Effectiveness and resourcefulness in the Ph.D. process; Self-awareness and self-reflection; and Feeling supported. There were six sub-themes: Ph.D. process understanding; New perspectives; Emotional consciousness; Self-confidence; Being listened to and receiving empathy; and The complementary support of the coach and the academic supervisor. Participants reported that (1) coaching sessions were a positive experience, (2) they benefitted from the coaching and (3) coaching prompted new reflections for both the present and future. The study provides insight for coaches working in Higher Education in general and with Ph.D. students in particular.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Ph.D.; students; higher education; coaching; IPA

Practice points

- Shares focused insights supporting coaches thinking about coaching in Higher Education.
- Offers key reflections to multiple other stakeholders, including faculty supervising Ph.D. students; administrators and mental health professionals in higher education.
- Contributes to the literature on individual coaching interventions in Higher Education, especially regarding Ph.D. student stress, progress and well-being.

'The Ph.D. journey, like foreign travel, involves the exploration of unknown territories and encounters with unfamiliar cultures. The experience is as much emotional as cognitive, and aspects of the journey may be exhilarating, frightening, puzzling, stimulating, exhausting or tedious' (Miller & Brimicombe, 2003, p. 5). This metaphor of travel illustrates

that undertaking a Ph.D. is a complex, transformational, multi-stage and time-bound process occurring in a stressful environment and requiring a combination of personal and external resources.

Ph.D. students face higher rates of anxiety and depression, burnout and emotional exhaustion compared with the general population (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017). They may also exhibit unrealistic expectations of their own performance and negative thought patterns, leading some of them to leave their degrees unfinished, and thus contributing to high, stable and costly attrition rates for Ph.D. programmes and the Ph.D. ecosystem as a whole (Travaglianti et al., 2018).

Key stressors for Ph.D. students include challenges with work–family dynamics and family and monetary stress (Evans et al., 2018), social isolation or lack of social support, high job demands with low job control, challenges in working with a supervisor, negative perceptions about their post-Ph.D. career (Levecque et al., 2017), career uncertainty (Skakni et al., 2019) and time pressure and constraints (Devine & Hunter, 2017).

Factors enabling Ph.D. students' progress include having the autonomy to choose goals that make sense for them, having strong social and self-regulatory skills, feeling like they are making progress (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), feeling prepared to undertake a Ph.D. (Litalien & Guay, 2015), having time commitment and peer support, successfully socialising within their department and having personal self-efficacy (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011), having career support beyond the Ph.D., financial opportunities, self-regulatory strategies, writing skills and a sense of self-worth (Sverdluk et al., 2018), and having personal commitment to projects and sufficient time (Pychyl & Little, 1998).

Factors contributing to Ph.D. students' well-being include 'being true to oneself, being in a sphere of influence within the academic context' (Schmidt & Umans, 2014, p. 1); making time for self-care (Zahniser et al., 2017); exhibiting individual resourcefulness, receiving support from peers and friends, having work–life balance (Beasy et al., 2019); and having a supportive supervisor relationship (De Clercq et al., 2019).

Several individual and collective interventions seem beneficial in reducing Ph.D. student stress and poor mental health, enhancing performance and improving well-being. Some proposed solutions include using therapy or support groups (Tsai & Muindi, 2016); incorporating mental health support into training grants; encouraging departments to build cultures of self-care; creating Ph.D. mentoring circles (Zahniser et al., 2017); encouraging peer mentoring among doctoral students (Lewinski et al., 2017); developing positive psychology interventions (Marais et al., 2018); and being coached either in a group or individually (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016).

Although coaching is gaining popularity as a topic for academic research, coaching doctoral students is still relatively unusual, hence under-researched (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016).

Three recent empirical studies have specifically explored the use of individual coaching with doctoral students. Godskesen and Kobayashi (2016) studied the effect of individual coaching on doctoral students using a mixed methods approach. The 55 Ph.D. students who participated in the quantitative portion of the study reported that coaching was an effective way to support them in making progress in their doctoral education and constructively changed their behaviour. For the qualitative portion (thematic analysis) of the study, 24 Ph.D. students participated, and the researchers identified seven likely interdependent themes that should be considered in the doctoral journey: (1) recognising

problems, (2) developing awareness of one's needs, (3) confronting problems, (4) aligning with reality by accepting what cannot be changed, (5) enhancing structure, (6) improving relations with the surrounding academic community and (7) receiving support from the coach. The use of a mixed methods design in this study brought additional insights to the quantitative findings in uncovering why and how coaching was effective.

Lane and De Wilde (2018) explored how the use of individual coaching with five doctoral students may influence their well-being in a qualitative mixed methods study combining semi-structured interviews and a short end-of-programme questionnaire. The participants reported a positive experience of coaching, expressing that it helped them build confidence, enhance self-awareness, improve personal effectiveness and develop assertiveness. Some also reported improvement in their well-being.

Lech et al. (2018) published another empirical paper exploring the effect of four individual coaching sessions on six Ph.D. student participants. Through IPA, they used semi-structured interviews, uncovering six emergent themes resulting from coaching: (1) feeling motivated, (2) enhanced self-confidence, (3) space to self-reflect, (4) encouraging resourcefulness in the Ph.D. process, (5) feeling supported and (6) having someone to talk to.

This review of the extant literature suggests that coaching can be beneficial to Ph.D. students, influence their academic progression and output, help them develop research and professional skills, and improve relationships.

Methods

Design

This study qualitatively examined the lived experience of Ph.D. students who received individual coaching. It addressed a gap in the research by contributing to existing empirical literature on how individual coaching can benefit Ph.D. students, focusing on a homogeneous group of mature Ph.D. students in the same stage of their doctoral journey as suggested by Lech et al. (2018), and using methodology that reduces potential bias by clearly separating the coach from the researcher/interviewer.

IPA was considered the most appropriate qualitative approach for this study because it aims to illuminate the individual lived experience and meaning of Ph.D. students who have received coaching (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

The study participants consisted of four Ph.D. students (three females and one male) undertaking a Ph.D. programme in Denmark (see Table 1).

Table 1. Table of participant descriptors.

Pseudonym	Topic of Ph.D.	Age	Gender	Ph.D. Start date
Mary	Architecture	35+	Female	02/2017
Jeanne	Psychology	35+	Female	03/2018
Ingrid	Economics	31–35	Female	09/2018
Colin	Engineering	31–35	Male	09/2019

Each participant was in the last 18 months of their Ph.D. journey, a stage 'where the Ph.D. candidate is not yet a scholar but is more than just a student' (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 530). This stage was chosen for the participants' potential retrospective review of their Ph.D. journey so far, with the possibility of Ph.D. students already having had significant interactions with their supervisor and the potential risk of experiencing high stress in the second part of their thesis journey potentially affecting their well-being. Each participant had some maturity acquired through professional experience and did not start their Ph.D. immediately after their master's degree.

Coaching sessions for all students involved in this research were carried out by the same certified professional coach, who also holds a Ph.D. in Engineering and who develops her own coaching philosophy and techniques influenced by this specific combination of backgrounds. Her knowledge and experience as both coach and a former Ph.D. student help her to constantly adjust to the client and context.

Finally, each student received a minimum of five one-to-one coaching sessions in person and/or online within the space of a year. This criterion was chosen to provide sufficient time and space for the participants to have reflected on the outcomes of their coaching sessions and developed new practices based on them.

Procedure

To recruit participants for this research, the researcher asked the coach to forward her advertisement to Ph.D. students who fit the criteria. The first four respondents were selected and then invited to participate in the research study. Interviews were organised in May and June 2021 online using Microsoft Teams, and audio was recorded on Microsoft Streams and then stored in UEL's secured servers, with the participants' consent. All references to any identifying details were deleted and replaced by the participants' pseudonyms (see Table 1).

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were used to elicit concrete details of the lived experience of coaching, combining descriptive, narrative, structural, contrast, evaluative, comparative and prompt questions. Each one-to-one interview lasted for at least 45 min. Similar questions were used with each participant and are listed below:

- How did you come to join the coaching initiative?
- How would you describe your coaching experience?
- To what extent has the coaching experience been what you expected it to be?
- Could you tell me about how you felt about being coached?
- What general topics/themes have you covered?
- How have you developed through coaching?
- How is coaching affecting you, if at all?
- Could you tell me of your best/worst experience in coaching?
- What have you achieved through the coaching sessions?
- Would you recommend one-to-one coaching to your Ph.D. student friends and why?
- How has coaching influenced you for the future?

For each question, the researcher used prompts such as 'Can you tell me more?' 'What words, thoughts, feelings, ... spring to mind?'

Data analysis

The first step in data analysis was transcribing the interviews. After that, the transcripts were read a few times by the researcher for understanding. Following this, detailed notes were taken consisting of comprehensive comments around the context of the interviews. The next step was highlighting and coding important themes using marginal notes. Finally, unique themes and patterns were highlighted, then grouped into a table (Smith et al., 2009).

Results

Three themes emerged in relation to the experience under consideration. For each theme, two sub-themes emerged from the data as presented in [Table 2](#).

Theme 1: Effectiveness and resourcefulness in the Ph.D. process

Effectiveness and resourcefulness in the Ph.D. process emerged as two distinctive outcomes from the coaching experience and have been respectively articulated into two sub-themes: ‘developing understanding’ and ‘bringing new perspectives’.

Developing understanding

Three out of four participants reported that coaching helped increase their effectiveness in the Ph.D. process. In this study, effectiveness is linked with an increase in understanding of the Ph.D. process, due in no small part to coaching. Mary’s rather unemotional, strategic approach to her studies was supported by this aspect of the coaching programme:

Thanks to coaching, I feel more effective, more in control of my process, and I feel I have started to recognise and to better understand the different stages of the research.

Moreover, developing understanding of the Ph.D. process seems to have resonated differently for each participant. For both Jane, with her strong, confident personality and Mary, who had been more fearful both about her work and her relationship with her supervisor, a deeper understanding of the process led to better task and time management and priority-setting skills. Jane explained:

Thanks to coaching, I took the decision of taking one article and dividing [it] into two, to set smaller steps that I can reach, to revise my time plans, and I’ve gotten more writing done and revisited priorities where I spend my time and energy.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes resulting from the data analysis.

Theme 1: Effectiveness and resourcefulness in the Ph.D. process
Developing understanding
Bringing new perspectives
Theme 2: Self-awareness and Self-reflection
Being more conscious of emotional states
Strengthening self-confidence
Theme 3: Feeling supported
Experiencing a safe space where they are listened to and receive empathy
Leveraging complementary support from the academic supervisor and coach

This deeper understanding of the process led Mary to greater realisation of the inherent ups and downs. Coaching gave her a container to safely voice the perceived discomfort of being a beginner and not knowing:

I know that it's okay that when I enter a new subject, that I'm not in control, that I need to give space to being in ...

These participants believed that transactional coaching conversations increased their effectiveness by giving them a better understanding of the whole Ph.D. process, and that insight resulted from different perceptions and a different focus on the Ph.D. process.

Bringing new perspectives

Transformational Coaching conversations also helped the participants see their Ph.D. journey from new perspectives, which, in turn, gave rise to a sense of resourcefulness. For example, Mary and Ingrid underlined how some of the coach's powerful questions encouraged them to shift their perspective regarding the Ph.D. process, something that is not easy to do alone. Ingrid's need to protect herself when showing and expressing vulnerability was apparent in her embarrassed laughter and in the time she took to express her understanding of this:

I think this sort of questions with different perspective is quite useful in terms of trying out other ways of thinking and I think will be very challenging to do on my own.

While all participants mentioned the word 'perspectives', they seemed to have different interpretations of it. For example, Jane and Colin linked these 'new perspectives' with new thinking about their professional identity. Jane realised that her professional identity has been built according to the professional experience she acquired outside of academia before starting her Ph.D. This insight reassured her in her confident ability to professionally bounce back if necessary and relax:

Coaching helped me to think what if I won't have my PhD, but also realised that I have some security in who I am and what I can do in another field that I can always fall back on and grow upon. So, I think that's been a big thing. I feel a bit more relaxed with the whole thing.

Colin's need for emotional support was apparent through his hesitant mannerisms when mentioning how coaching had helped him to take some distance and develop a clear distinction between undertaking a Ph.D. and being a person with a life outside the Ph.D. Remembered stress seemingly reignited emotions, as he caught breath and paused when recounting his experience:

Coaching also reminded me that my PhD, it's not my life, that life is bigger than a PhD; it's an important facet of my life. But my life is so much richer and bigger than my PhD.

Mary and Colin also reported how coaching conversations assisted them in realising the importance of keeping a balance in life in this long-term journey.

Meanwhile, Mary and Ingrid underlined how the coaching conversations helped them get rid of certain limiting beliefs regarding the Ph.D. duties, as expressed pragmatically by Mary:

That has been also a thing for me to let go of the feeling that I have to work all the time to be a good student.

and more cautiously by Ingrid as:

It's been about quality over quantity, both in writing, but also in time, how much time you spend, that it's actually better to do five hours of quality research a day than 10 h of wasting time.

and

I think one of the first time she [the coach] said that maybe I should try working on the things that I wanted to work on and not think of the things I thought I should work on.

Theme 2: Self-awareness and self-reflection

The second theme deals with self-awareness and self-reflection, bringing together insights revealed during the interviews about how coaching allowed these participants to explore their moods and emotions. This theme also reflects on the contribution of coaching in strengthening self-confidence in the present and for the future, including beyond the Ph.D., as well as the use of new self-reflection practices. This theme is divided into two sub-themes: 'becoming more conscious of emotional states' and 'strengthening self-confidence'.

Becoming more conscious of emotional states

All the participants expressed how, before they received coaching, they felt 'alone' or 'insecure' in the pursuit of their Ph.D. journey. These adjectives and other frequently mentioned words, such as 'emotions', 'energy', 'excitement' and 'frustration', spoke to a need to address issues related to mental health, well-being and emotions. Mary and Colin reported how much the coaching sessions supported them raising in awareness of their emotions and developing emotion literacy. The coaching sessions helped Mary detach from her more naturally analytic style, enabling her to self-reflect on the role of moods and emotions as a predisposition for action or inaction.

Coaching helped me to be aware that sometimes you just don't have the positive mood and sometimes you just don't have the energy to do the hard writing, but then you can always take another task that your brain can manage, and then you still have the positive feeling of getting something done, even though maybe it wasn't what you had planned.

Jane's manner and tone were energetic as she reported a very positive experience with coaching in terms of developing new practices regarding self-care after reconnecting with her emotions and her body:

I felt that coaching conversations made me gentler with myself in some way.

Indeed, coaching sessions seem to have initiated a new territory of learning for the participants in the domain of moods, emotions and the body. This has been articulated to different insights, such as developing emotional literacy and reconnecting with their emotions and body, which led to new practices that improved their well-being in this long-term journey.

Strengthening self-confidence

An area of convergence for all the students was that coaching gave them self-confidence. For example, Mary, who had lacked confidence in her relationship with a supervisor who

scared her, described the key role played by the coach in strengthening her self-assurance in her current journey:

So, having someone who was outside the project, who was my person, and who could help me with a more objective view and things and who could actually give me some self confidence in the journey.

Jane and Ingrid identified how coaching gave them some underlying new practices and skills that will support them beyond the Ph.D. Ingrid exemplified this position:

I hope that I can go back to some of the insights and use them later because I don't think that some of the challenges are only PhD related. But I guess a lot of them are also general resource on work-based challenges. So, I definitely think that this process of working with yourself in this way is going to be useful later.

Colin, who had felt rather alone and abandoned in the Ph.D. process, noticed how coaching helped him identify the characteristics of a supportive working environment that can help him cultivate stability and strengthen his self-confidence and self-esteem:

With coaching, I realised how important it is for a PhD student to find himself to land in a university or in a research team that creates the necessary conditions of self-confidence, of stability, and of self-esteem in a way that would be conducive to then lead to good research.

Coaching allowed Colin to self-reflect on his conditions of satisfaction for a future work environment following his Ph.D. Additionally, Mary and Ingrid both mentioned that they were feeling more self-confident when talking with their supervisors.

Theme 3: Feeling supported

All the participants mentioned that the coaching sessions offered them a space to feel supported. This theme can be divided into two sub-themes: 'experiencing a safe space where they are listened to and receive empathy' and 'leveraging the complementary support of the academic supervisor and the coach'.

Experiencing a safe space where they are listened to and receive empathy

The greatest area of convergence in the reported experience of the participants was that coaching gave them a safe space where they were genuinely listened to and could receive empathy. This was exemplified by Mary:

With one-to-one coaching it was the feeling of having a person who was on my side, who listened to me and who acknowledged my progress.

Ingrid, despite her initial lack of confidence and her need to take time when processing information, also experienced the coaching sessions as a space where exposing vulnerability and voicing challenges were safe and liberating activities:

Coaching offered me the possibility to share vulnerability by putting words and exposing difficulties.

Leveraging the complementary support from the academic supervisor and the coach

The second sub-theme concerns the complementary support of academic supervision and coaching sessions. The participants reported that coaching helped them reflect on these two different supports as relevant and complementary to each other. For example, Jane made a distinction between the types of conversations she has with her supervisor and the ones she has with her coach. She described them as being complementary and bringing different perspectives.

I've used my academic supervisor and my coach for different things. I've used my academic supervisor for practical stuff: what conferences are good to go, what journals to read or choose, but also reading my texts and then give me feedback on that. And I use the coach more for how to organise my life as a PhD student.

Mary reported how coaching conversations helped her to strategically and less fearfully interact with her academic supervisor:

I use coaching to be strategic in when and how to keep my supervisor informed.

Ingrid valued the impartial external position of the coach. She did not talk explicitly about distress, but this was apparent in her quiet, uncertain manner as she explained the coach would not interfere with the 'power' role of the academic supervisor, and his potential impact on her research and career:

I think it's really useful that it's another person [the coach] because PhD student-advisor relationship is a bit power relationship so that I would keep the student supervisor relationships on pretty specific academic content whereas coaching aspect can be more personal and sensitive.

Thus, most participants reported how coaching helped them to experience a safe space where they are listened to and receive empathy, and to leverage the complementary support from the academic supervisor and the coach.

Discussion

The phenomenon of individual coaching was examined based on the lived experience of four Ph.D. students, comprising several features. First, the participants unanimously agreed that coaching was a positive experience that enabled them to consider the end of their doctoral journey with less stress and become better equipped with new tools and self-reflection. Second, they attributed specific outcomes to coaching. From these insights, three major themes emerged: effectiveness and resourcefulness in the Ph.D. process, self-awareness and self-reflection, and feeling supported.

Effectiveness and resourcefulness in the Ph.D. process

Coaching helped the Ph.D. students increase their understanding of the Ph.D. process (effectiveness) and improve their ability to develop new perspectives (resourcefulness).

Regarding effectiveness, this study highlights key stressors for doctoral students such as exhibiting unrealistic expectations about their own performance (Travaglianti et al., 2018), time pressure and constraints (Devine & Hunter, 2017). It also highlights factors of Ph.D.

progression, such as feeling like they are making progress (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), having sufficient time (Pyckyl & Little, 1998) and having personal self-efficacy (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011).

Regarding resourcefulness, this study highlights key stressors such as career uncertainty (Skakni et al., 2019) and fear of failing to meet programme requirements (Rocha-Singh, 1994). It also highlights enabling factor of progress such as having the autonomy to choose goals that make sense for them and having strong social and self-regulatory skills (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), having a sense of self-worth (Sverdlik et al., 2018) and enabling factor of well-being such as work–life balance (Beasy et al., 2019).

Furthermore, it lends support to Lech et al. (2018) findings that coaching positively affects resourcefulness, as several students perceived that coaching improved their ability to take on different perspectives regarding their Ph.D. studies. Improving the effectiveness and resourcefulness of the Ph.D. process through coaching contributed to deconstructing the participants' misconceptions of the Ph.D. journey, such as it being a 'necessary painful experience' (Miller & Brimicombe, 2003, p. 5) or a 'rite of passage' (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 530); instead, the students developed new perceptions of their experience and became equipped with new tools to break down these limiting beliefs.

The most significant insight in the first theme arose from the homogeneity of the small group of participants. A certain level of maturity and an early professional identity acquired before starting a Ph.D. programme seem to have been key resources for most of the participants and enabled them to take on new perspectives, especially in challenging situations.

The feeling of preparation to undertake a Ph.D. was mentioned by Litalien and Guay (2015) as an enabler of progress in the Ph.D. journey. Observing the lack of mental preparation and knowledge in the Ph.D. journey for such a long and difficult exercise was surprising. Although some senior researchers allow their students to develop awareness and competencies to accomplish the academic part of the doctoral journey, more attention to well-being, stress management and personal development is needed to prepare future doctoral students for this experience.

Self-awareness and self-reflection

For the Ph.D. students, the coaching sessions contributed to a perceived development of self-awareness and self-reflection articulated through an increased consciousness of emotional states and a reinforcement of self-confidence in line with Lech et al. (2018) findings. Furthermore, these findings are in line with the research of Lane and De Wilde (2018), wherein the participants expressed that coaching helped them build confidence and enhance self-awareness, and some reported an improvement in their well-being.

This study sheds light particularly on the need for doctoral students to develop their emotional intelligence (Cherniss, 2010; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), including the ability to recognise, comprehend, utilise, communicate, and manage their emotions and make time for self-care (Zahniser et al., 2017). The interviews highlight key factors of well-being such as peer support, successfully socialising within their department (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011) and supportive supervisor relationship (De Clercq et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the coaching sessions seemed to help the participants reconnect with their emotions and bodily sensations. For some, it was also an invitation to explore new mental wellness practices, such as meditation and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

This study highlights how coaching enabled these participants to strengthen their self-confidence (Cox & Bachkirova, 2007), as they complete their Ph.D. studies. It also reports how the coaching sessions helped them to address negative perceptions about their post-Ph.D. careers (Levecque et al., 2017) and career uncertainty (Skakni et al., 2019) and develop new visions, self-reflections and practices that will support them beyond their studies.

Feeling supported

The coaching experience of the participants highlighted their relationships with the coach. In all these cases, coaching increased the students' tendency to open up to the coach, which aided in improving their progress and well-being. The study also showed how the students felt about coaching in relation to academic supervision during their Ph.D. journey. As such, the third theme reveals the importance of listening and empathy in Ph.D. advancement. It also shows the complementary nature of coach and supervisor roles and the extent to which the coach helps make the student's relationship with the supervisor less strained, more strategic and more useful in terms of preparing important conversations. Findings also support studies mentioning that the quality of interaction with the supervisor is a source of well-being (De Clercq et al., 2019) or a source of stress (Levecque et al., 2017) for doctoral students; also highlighting that interaction with the supervisor is a key factor of progress and well-being (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016; Lane & De Wilde, 2018).

This study invites the reader to reflect on the coach's profile, considering how the participants have built trust with her, acknowledging her broad experience in supporting doctoral students and assessing to what extent her common experience of having pursued a Ph.D. herself may have made a difference or not (Passmore, 2010). This study did not fully answer this question. However, the themes that emerged from the interviews have captured a number of specific challenges related to the multi-faceted nature of the Ph.D. journey. These include the process of writing; the long-term nature of the process; the supervisor-Ph.D. student relationship; and the uncertainty of the post Ph.D. period, creating a specific context which someone who had not themselves engaged in this experience may not have been able to fully perceive.

Overall discussion

This paper has added to the literature by providing a detailed description of what coaching can achieve based on the perspectives of a homogeneous group of mature Ph.D. students. The interviews revealed the benefits of coaching for these participants in different types of conversations. Transactional coaching conversations helped the students manage time, set goals and organise tasks, while transformational coaching conversations helped them gain new perspectives, acquire new distinctions and change the way they view the doctoral experience (Flaherty, 2005, p. 23). These results, whilst not generalisable, invite prospective coaches interested in coaching within a Higher Education context

to consider the specificities of this environment and some Ph.D.-related content that could be brought by the Ph.D. students into the coaching. This study also invites doctoral authorities within academic institutions to consider embedding coaching practices within the Ph.D. journey. Whilst this kind of initiative might involve financial and time costs, one could balance this cost against those associated with the growing number of students who drop out of doctoral programmes before completing their degrees (Travaglianti et al., 2018). While the cost of individual coaching remains high, other forms of support could also be considered, such as group coaching (Varley, 2021) and platform coaching (Passmore, 2021).

Limitations

First, this in-depth qualitative study focused on a small group of mature Ph.D. students, which is appropriate for exploring a specific phenomenon but may not be generalisable to other types of students.

Second, despite many efforts to create as much homogeneity as possible in the group being studied, one might observe the diversity of the Ph.D. topics studied by the participants as mentioned in Table 1 and question how this might have influenced their coaching experience given their different backgrounds and worldviews.

Finally, the interviews took place between six and eight weeks after the coaching sessions were concluded. This may have affected the participants' memory of the coaching experience, despite the detailed descriptions that they provided during the interviews showing clear memories of these experiences during their Ph.D. journey.

Suggestions for future research

The limitations of this study can provide some ideas for future studies. First, a longitudinal study that collects data on coaching needs throughout the Ph.D. journey can generate additional insights into the right time to start coaching sessions and who would benefit the most from such coaching. Second, another study could replicate this study on Ph.D. students who have received group coaching instead of individual coaching sessions.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Martine George is Professor of Management Practice at the University of Brussels (ULB) and an Adjunct Professor at ICHEC Management School, Brussels, Belgium. She holds a Ph.D. in Physical Science from University Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium, an MBA from Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh and a Master in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology from the University of East London. She is the Founder & Managing Director of MGHolistic SRL, a company that delivers

leadership development coaching, facilitation, innovative trainings with a particular focus on talent development of expert profiles and consulting to support companies to develop a data-driven culture. She is Professional Certified Coach (PCC) by International Coaching Federation (ICF), Senior Practitioner by EMCC and Certified ontological coach (NCC) from Newfield Network, CO, US. She has an international executive coaching practice.

Ruth Hughes is a coach, supervisor, educator, consultant and professional speaker in the fields of coaching psychology, positive psychology, positive education, culture shock and international student well-being. After thirty years as a teacher and senior leader in the education and charity sectors, Ruth completed an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology, founding her award-winning company **Curious Human** in 2018. She is Course Director for the UG Coaching Certificate Programme at Cambridge University (ICE), Adjunct Professor at AIFS and research supervisor/marker at the University of East London. Speaking engagements have included ICEF Berlin; BSA/AEGIS/BAISIS, English UK; TENs and LLE; The Positive Psychology Symposium at New Bucks University; CUBO; The Association for Coaching and the British Psychological Society SFCG International Conference.

ORCID

Martine George  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8591-7763>

Ruth Hughes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6920-2602>

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