

Students' experiences of academic coaching in Norway: a pilot study

Academic
coaching

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to identify and describe how students experience academic coaching in higher education in Norway.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed a descriptive and exploratory qualitative design where semi-structured interviews formed the basis for data collection. Thematic analysis was used as an analytic strategy to identify, organise and find patterns or themes that emerged from the data.

Findings – The findings showed that academic coaching positively influenced the respondents' ability to identify the necessary and efficient cognitive processes and metacognitive skills needed to cope with everyday scholastic challenges. Academic coaching affected the respondents' metacognitive skills and cognitive processes in terms of evolving their self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, stress identification, goal identification, goal setting and development of new strategies.

Research limitations/implications – The findings in this study reflect the respondents' subjective opinions and further research is needed to validate these findings.

Originality/value – This article addresses a gap in the field of research by offering a descriptive pilot study and thematic analysis of students' experiences with academic coaching in Norway.

Keywords Academic coaching, Higher education, Cognitive processes, Metacognition, Self-efficacy, Self-awareness, Self-regulation, Motivation, Goal identification, Strategies, Coach role

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Several studies of students' mental health conducted over the last 2 decades have suggested an increased incidence of psychological distress among students (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2013; Kitrow, 2009; Robinson, 2015) and that high levels of psychological distress are more common among students than their non-studying peers (Skogen *et al.*, 2017). The SHoT study, conducted among full-time students in higher education in Norway in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2021, surveys



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students' mental health and wellbeing (SHoT, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2021). The purpose of SHoT (an acronym for the Norwegian name Studentenes Helse-og Trivselsundersøkelse) is to map students' health and wellbeing in a broad sense and provide insight into students' feelings and how welfare offered to students can be improved. Findings show that the proportions characterised as serious mental symptoms increased from 16% in 2010 to 21% in 2014 and to 29% in 2018 (SHoT, 2018, p. 71). Moreover, 7–15% of the students reported experiences of low study mastery, low implementation ability, reduced quality of life, loneliness, personality conditions and symptoms of mental illness (often a combination of these) (SHoT, 2014). Several studies have confirmed that psychological variables such as rumination and worrying contribute to mental health problems, lower academic performance and dropout from university (Kim and Seo, 2015; Robinson, 2015; Roso-Bas *et al.*, 2016). Brackney and Karabenick (1995; see also Kitzrow, 2009) found significant correlations between high levels of psychological distress and academic performance, which led to less effective time management, less effective learning strategies and use of study resources, reduced capacity to resist distractions, lower academic self-efficacy (ASE) and higher test anxiety. Kitzrow (2009) also claimed that high levels of psychopathology reduce the ability to process information, which is a critical component of academic performance and success. These problems need to be addressed within the academic community. Kitzrow (2009) claimed that it is an institutional responsibility to provide counselling and support to students who experience problems and to assist them to achieve their educational and personal goals. A key question is whether academic coaching can support development, facilitate wellbeing and improve students' everyday lives.

Purpose of study

Academic coaching emerged as a response to support and improve academic performance among students (Bettinger and Baker, 2014; Capstick *et al.*, 2019; Howlett *et al.*, 2021a, b; Robinson, 2015). However, there seems to be a need for research that aims to understand the student–coach relationship and to examine the effects of coaching on students in higher education and how intervention potentially can impact student behaviour (Howlett *et al.*, 2021a, b; Robinson, 2015; Vanacore and Dahan, 2021) as few of these measures have been evaluated empirically by addressing the outcomes of individual academic coaching (Vanacore and Dahan, 2021). Capstick *et al.* (2019) called for more targeted research on how academic coaching affects student behaviour (e.g. academic skills, self-efficacy, resilience) and the dynamics of the coaching relationship (e.g. working alliance) to provide a richer understanding of the coaching experience and practice. To date, there is no such research in a Norwegian context. This pilot study addresses a gap in the field of research related to the effects of coaching in higher education. The design of this pilot study aimed to identify, describe and analyze students' experiences of academic coaching sessions in order to concretise the potential impacts on student behaviour. The research question was “How did students experience academic coaching?”

Theory

Academic coaching

Academic coaching is a positive psychological approach where the coach attempts to help the coachee (student) to elevate their performance to achieve specific goals (Bettinger and Baker, 2014; Crabb, 2011; Grant *et al.*, 2009) and empower them to find their own solutions through a collaborative dialogue with the coach. It involves a coach–student relationship where the coach uses their skills to build relationships through trust, active listening, genuine curiosity in others and ability to use effective observation and communication skills (Crabb, 2011; Grant *et al.*, 2009; Irwin and Morrow, 2005). Howlett *et al.* (2021b) described academic

coaching as a method that facilitates a collaborative dialogue between the coach and student, which empowers them to (1) set, act towards and stay committed to goals, (2) understand their habits and thinking patterns, (3) understand their strengths and weaknesses and (4) learn self-regulation and effective study skills. Being an effective coach means self-management by not having any personal agenda or meaning of the coaches' issue, managing personal understandings and insights, understanding objective aspects of the problem and mirroring the student's perspectives and understandings (Grant *et al.*, 2009; Robinson, 2015). The core of the coach role is to enhance the student's metacognitive skills, rather than a specific subject area, based on an understanding that the student is the source that possesses the necessary resources to solve their own problems (Robinson, 2015).

Within academia, the goal of didactics is to find the best-suited method to facilitate students' learning, the main principles being what the student needs to know, the student's self-concept and their readiness and motivation to learn (Knowles *et al.*, 2015). Studies (Brackney and Karabenick, 1995; Kim and Seo, 2015; Kitzrow, 2009; Robinson, 2015; Roso-Bas *et al.*, 2016) have suggested that a student's self-concept and readiness and motivation to learn can be disturbed by psychological distress. Stelter and Law (2010) claimed that coaching helps students develop self-reflection and critical thinking skills through processes that allow them to examine their own learning experiences and processes, which is a prerequisite for academic success. The coach's mission in academic coaching is to help students understand those processes that hinder productive academic behaviours by leading them through self-assessment, reflection and goal setting (Anderson, 2011). The coaching process allows students to focus on the learning experience and to identify problems they need to address and goals they seek to achieve (Howlett *et al.*, 2021a). Coaching can also help students to develop alternative skills and understand and appreciate new knowledge (Stelter and Law, 2010). The coach's approach to each coaching session is to encourage the student to identify topics for the session and, through a didactic process, clarify the most important theme to work with (Howlett *et al.*, 2021a). Coaching encourages students to take an active part in their study life and focus strongly on identifying goals and implementing strategies based on their own solutions, which should contribute to a stronger commitment to address the problem (Gjerde, 2010). Whitworth *et al.* (2007, cited in Gjerde, 2010) stated:

Coaching is not about solving problems, even though problems will be solved. It is not first and foremost about performance, reaching goals or achieving results, even though this is more likely to happen in an effective coaching relationship. We believe coaching is first and foremost about discovery, consciousness and choice. (p. 38)

Academic coaching: cognitive processes and metacognition

Academic coaching aims to improve academic achievement, by exploring new approaches and developing new academic strategies. These new approaches may take cognitive processes a step further and strengthen metacognitive and motivational skills (Howlett *et al.*, 2021b) such as self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-regulation. Cognitive processes and metacognition connect two levels of thinking, where the first level engages a cognitive strategy to solve a problem and the second level involves using metacognition to examine the effectiveness of the strategy (Padmanabha, 2020). Flavell (1979) expanded the concept of metacognition to encompass four components that interact in complex ways: metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experiences, metacognitive goals/tasks and metacognitive actions/strategies. These are processes individuals use to plan, monitor and assess their understanding and performance, including a critical awareness of thinking and learning in general (Chick, 2013).

Self-awareness theory refers to an individual's capacity to become the object of their own attention (Duval and Wicklund, 1972; Morin, 2006) and self-regulation refers to the extent to

which students are responsible and active participants in their own learning processes (Greene, 2017; Zimmerman, 1994). The self-regulative mechanism includes sub-functions such as self-monitoring one's behaviour, its determinants and effects; judgement of one's behaviour in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances; and affective self-reaction (Bandura, 1991; Medina *et al.*, 2017).

Dinther *et al.* (2011) added that self-efficacy influences motivation and cognition by means of affecting interest in new tasks, persistence, goal setting, the choices we make and our use of cognitive, metacognitive and self-regulatory strategies. Self-efficacy refers to our beliefs about the capability to learn or perform a task effectively (Bandura, 1986; Kitsantas and Zimmerman, 2009) and people with high self-efficacy have higher satisfaction with life and a sense of mastery that contributes to wellbeing (Azizli *et al.*, 2015). General self-efficacy seems to influence the extent to which individuals engage in planning their own future and planning is a strategy that helps individuals to structure and manifest control in their lives (Prenda and Lachman, 2001). Academic coaching helps strengthen a student's experience of self-efficacy through goal identification, strategies and goal achievement. Bandura (1994) suggested that increasing self-efficacy is often accompanied by motivational planning, including short term and longer term personal goals and Friedman and Lackey (1991) claimed that students with a future-oriented approach are more likely to master future tasks and exert more control during problem solving. Academic coaching uses a holistic approach, which considers how all aspects of the student's environment impact their learning. This suggests that academic coaching may help students evolve self-regulated learning related to cognitive, metacognitive and motivational strategies that support achievement of their goals (Howlett *et al.*, 2021b).

Method

The current study of students' experiences with academic coaching used a descriptive and exploratory qualitative design, where data was collected through semi-structured interviews with students after completing a self-selected number of academic coaching sessions. Qualitative research seeks to focus on participants' perspectives or views and explore and understand an individual's experience and situation (Daher *et al.*, 2017), which in this study is the students' descriptions of their experiences with academic coaching.

After transcribing the interviews, thematic analysis was used as an analytic strategy to provide an expanded understanding of the data material, combined with a theoretical discussion that may contribute to new descriptions or aspects (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Malterud, 2017) of students' experiences with academic coaching, as described in their own words.

Recruitment and selection

The study took place at Østfold University College, where academic coaching was not a regular part of student support services and the offer was presented to undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Work and Welfare programme, through the institution's digital learning platform. With limited resources, the "first come, first served" principle was followed, where the first 14 students to sign up were invited to participate in the study. The 14 students who signed up for this study were between the ages of 19 and 51 (average age 34), two male and 12 female and the coaching sessions took place during their second semester. The students committed to participate in an interview after finishing all their coaching sessions and the interviews were conducted by a researcher not involved in the coaching interventions. Thirteen interviews were conducted face-to-face and one by phone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed word by word, which provided solid and complex empirical material.

Coach training

The coach had undertaken coach training at the Norwegian Coach Academy (NCA), which offers coach education in accordance with the International Coaching Federation's (ICF's) requirement to become an Associate Certified Coach (ACC). NCA does not focus especially on one direction within coaching theory but uses theory and practice from different coaching practices. All the instructors at NCA are certified ICF coaches (norskcoachakademi.no). The academic coach in this study was a qualified coach with two years' practice, as well as an assistant professor in the Faculty of Health, Welfare and Organisation.

Interventions

The interventions were voluntary and the students were offered a maximum of seven individual coaching sessions every two weeks. It was considered important to give the students some time between the sessions in order for them to try out and act on their set goals. Academic coaching is a voluntary service and each student that participated in the study could decide for themselves to terminate the sessions after the number of coaching sessions they felt necessary. The coach started each session by asking open-ended questions to encourage the students to describe their most important topic for the day and let them set the agenda. Topics such as mastering the curriculum, feeling overwhelmed, time management and low ASE were brought up. At the end of each session, the student created an action plan in collaboration with the coach to act on between the sessions. Each session had a time restriction of 45–60 min and took place at the coach's office at campus.

Ethical approval

This study conformed to ethical guidelines for experimental studies at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Each student agreed to audio recording before each interview and was informed about the use of the recordings. All audio recordings from the interviews were stored on an external hard drive and deleted in accordance with NSD regulations. The transcribed material was read only by the researchers and all the respondents were anonymised and treated confidentially.

Interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore and extract specific information about the respondents' experiences with the academic coaching sessions. This method is considered suitable when studying people's perceptions and opinions ([Barriball and While, 1994](#)) as it creates possibilities to focus on issues that are meaningful for the participants and allows diverse perceptions to be expressed ([Cridland et al., 2015](#)). It also provides opportunities for the interviewer to follow up questions if important information arises ([Dawson, 2009](#)).

The interview guide aimed to encourage students to share their perceptions, opinions and thoughts about their experiences with academic coaching related to self-understanding and wellbeing, understanding the student role and academic thinking, mastery as a student and academic achievement and how they experienced the connection between purpose, goals and the results of academic coaching. The interview guide also covered issues about the coach role, timing and length of sessions.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as a method to identify, organise and find patterns or themes that emerged from the data material. According to [Miles and Huberman \(1994\)](#), data reduction is necessary before the matrix construction (categorisation and coding), which involves selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the raw data.

Miles and Huberman (1994) also asserted that coding *is* analysis, as categorisation of the data involves interpretation and value-laden assumptions about what the data actually means. By focusing on meaning *across* the dataset and searching for meaning to collective or shared meanings and experiences, this method helped us to identify shared ways a topic was talked about and provided meaning about these commonalities (Braun and Clark, 2012).

TA can be conducted in a number of different ways and has the ability to straddle three main continua: inductive vs deductive or theory-driven data coding and analysis, an experiential vs critical orientation to data and an essentialist vs constructionist theoretical perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This study used an inductive approach, which is a “bottom-up” approach, driven by what is *in* the data, where the themes arise from the content of the data material itself. The deductive approach is a “top-down” approach, where codes and themes derive more from concepts and ideas the researcher brings into the dataset. In reality, it is impossible to be *purely* inductive because researchers always bring something into the analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2012). However, one tends to predominate and in this study, the research group’s commitment towards an inductive approach signals an experiential orientation, which aims to prioritise the content of the dataset that “gives voice” to the students’ experiences (Braun and Clark, 2012). The TA process is not linear and the transcribed material in this study was read and processed many times to really get to know the content thoroughly (Braun and Clark, 2006).

Limitations of the study

This being a pilot study, implementing academic coaching in one single institution with a low number of participants means that the results cannot be generalised. However, studies of similar scope (Hakro and Mathew, 2020) have shown promising results that enable other institutions to draw lessons from the findings and continue the research.

The dual roles of the coach and interviewer, as part of the research group, may promote self-serving biases and two researchers not associated with the coaching sessions or data collection were included to maintain objectivity of the analysis. However, familiarity with the sessions and data collection may benefit contextualisation of the data and identify richer themes in ways not possible from an outside perspective. Additionally, as lecturers, both the coach and interviewer were familiar with the students and concerns about the coach’s dual role were brought up in the interviews.

To strengthen the study, a pre-intervention interview could have been conducted to map, for example, previous knowledge and expectations of academic coaching before the sessions, as bringing up the subjects after engaging in seven sessions obviously called into question the validity of their recall about those beliefs. Also, some topics could have been explored more thoroughly during the interviews to collect more explicit information about the students’ experiences.

TA is criticised because of the method’s flexibility, which can be both an advantage and a disadvantage in interpreting the data material. Developing specific guidelines for higher phase analysis is difficult and may potentially paralyze the researchers through biases and preferences in trying to decide what aspects of the data to focus on (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Categorisation of themes may also be a challenging exercise in TA as many of the themes in the data material can overlap and fit into more than one category.

Findings and discussion

Self-efficacy

All the respondents in the study reported low self-efficacy related to student life in general and claimed that academic coaching led to a positive change and helped them address and

concretise what the struggle was about. Hensley *et al.* (2018) stated that many first-year and first-time students struggle with low ASE, which results in low achievement on time management, prioritising and goal setting and scores highly on procrastination. Additionally, the SHoT survey (2014) identified ASE as a major factor related to students' mental health problems, where female students reported lower ASE than male and first-year students lower than seniors. One respondent in this study described her self-efficacy pre-coaching like this: "I was very insecure, all the time. It was all about becoming more confident, I did the right things, but I did not believe I did."

According to the respondents, the coach, through reflection and feedback, contributed to an understanding of what was expected in the student role. This understanding made the students trust their own academic capability in a better way and become more confident in themselves. Vanacore and Dahan (2021) claimed that the coaching model is designed to promote student self-efficacy, as the general set of best practices for academic coaching includes regular meetings, assessment of students' needs, goal setting, feedback and reflection. Another respondent put this into words: "I believe in myself now. I have managed to turn a negative pattern of thoughts that took over my everyday life."

This relates to how Flavell (1979) described development of metacognitive knowledge and experience, as this respondent had become aware of negative patterns and reflected upon experiences in order to evaluate and regulate cognitive processes, by using new knowledge to rethink and reform former metacognitive experiences. Furthermore, self-efficacy relates to a student's beliefs about the ability to self-regulate various forms of academic learning and perform in specific situations or frameworks (Bandura, 1986; Kitsantas and Zimmerman, 2009). Bandura (1997) acknowledged that individuals who possess strong self-efficacy beliefs related to a specific task are more likely to handle difficult situations, engage in complex cognitive processes and utilise independent learning strategies.

Self-awareness

When we focus attention on ourselves, we evaluate and compare our current behaviour to our internal standards and values (Duval and Wicklund, 1972), which elicits a state of objective self-awareness and makes us self-conscious as objective evaluations of ourselves. One respondent described increased self-awareness:

When you start out with coaching sessions it is incredible what comes up and the way the coach identifies issues by asking "you said this now, what do you mean when you say that?" – and that made me think, yes – what do I mean?

Most respondents in the study described increased self-awareness, by concretising how the coaching sessions initiated new thought processes which led to new thought patterns. Although some of the respondents did not concretise new thought patterns explicitly during the interviews, all of them described an increased *focus* on thoughts and emotions that positively affected their development and progress as students. Moreover, they described a more objective understanding of the impact of self-awareness. Duval and Wicklund (1972) and Morin (2006) claimed that increased self-awareness strengthens the ability to become a reflective observer and process self-information.

All respondents in this study claimed that they became more critical and more aware of both others' and their own actions and experienced a deeper understanding of the student role. Howlett *et al.* (2021b) suggested that a collaborative approach that acknowledges the students as experts on their lives may facilitate cognitive and metacognitive processes that are essential for generating mutual feedback between the student, their behaviour and their surroundings. One of our respondents said, "It is funny, you actually know, but just by talking to someone, bringing it out in the daylight, plays a major role in revealing things you know, you just need help to reveal it".

Both [Pintrich \(2002\)](#) and [Howlett *et al.* \(2021b\)](#) pointed out the importance of metacognitive mastery, since development of self-knowledge and self-awareness is positively linked to student learning.

Self-regulation

Positive self-regulation is associated with changes that make students more active and responsible in the learning process and how they assess their own behaviour in relation to the environment ([Bandura, 1991](#); [Howlett *et al.*, 2021a](#); [Zimmerman, 1994](#)) and one of the respondents gave a rather interesting description of changes in behaviour as a result of self-regulation:

I ask a lot of questions in class, much more than before – before, I had the questions but wanted to figure it out myself. It's the independence thing again, I want to find out for myself, I can do it myself – but now I ask, I bother, I annoy them and discuss with the lecturers. And I learn a lot, I dig into books and websites. It has made me more aware and more critical.

The same respondent also described minimal interaction with peers before the coaching sessions, justified by lack of interest and time and experienced a more beneficial change in behaviour towards social interaction. [Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons \(1986\)](#) confirmed this, arguing that highly self-regulated students seek help from teachers and classmates more often than poorly self-regulated students. Other respondents in the study also described a “changed mindset” which led to more responsible behaviour due to their newly gained belief in their ability to change. The majority of respondents described incorporation of new techniques, which were also found to be advantageous in situations beyond the academic context; [Greene \(2017\)](#) stated, “Students who have effective self-regulation knowledge, skills and beliefs are more likely to succeed across varied contexts, compared to their peers who, for whatever reason, struggle to self-regulate” (p. 15).

All the respondents in this study described a change of behaviour that could be interpreted as increased self-regulation and some of them seemed surprised by their own ability to identify problems, find solutions and plan and implement strategies, as illustrated through this response: “It was interesting, I was the one talking, the coach asked questions that started out my own reflection process. So, it was actually me myself who defined the problem and found the solution.” For the coach, this felt like the famous quote of Socrates: “I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.”

Social cognitive researchers like [Zimmerman \(1994\)](#) imply that increased self-efficacy affects students' perceived responsibility because their confidence enables them to self-regulate learning processes and thereby take more responsibility for their own academic outcomes.

Motivation

Of 14 respondents in the study, only two explicitly mentioned motivation as a theme during the interviews, even though most of them described a positive change of behaviour which, during the TA, was interpreted as increased motivation.

Most respondents in this study struggled to get started with academic topics and assignments as they felt overwhelmed, explained by a lack of self-discipline, laziness, lack of interest in certain subjects or perceiving subjects and tasks as more complex than they actually were. After the coaching sessions, they described a newfound inspiration and belief in their own ability to implement new skills, as the coach helped them break down the tasks and make them manageable. [Dinther *et al.* \(2011\)](#) linked these findings to self-efficacy as a drive for motivation and cognition, by improving students' interest in task persistence, goal setting, choices they make and their use of cognitive, metacognitive and self-regulatory

strategies. Bandura (1993, 1997) claimed that increased self-efficacy makes an increase in motivation and positive action more likely.

Stress identification

All respondents in the study described self-perceived stress, often in connection with feeling overwhelmed by the student role. According to Sawatzky *et al.* (2012), students who lack the ability to recognise and manage stressors are vulnerable to develop more adverse psychological outcomes. In this study, respondents described how academic coaching provided tools that helped them sort out and identify stressors, which was an important step towards mobilising strategies. One respondent in our study explained how new techniques helped identify the emotions that caused stress:

I use the techniques in many situations and feel it has helped me – I do it almost once a week because I'm stressed – but I have become better at reflecting on where those feelings come from – it has helped me become less stressed.

It is assumed that when emotions are better faced, the attributional style will be more positively angled (Landsman-Dijkstra *et al.*, 2006) and when students develop techniques to recognise and respond to stress, it shows a positive effect on student learning and improved wellbeing (Sawatzky *et al.*, 2012). Brackney and Karabenick (1995) and Kitzrow (2009) confirmed that psychological distress affects academic performance and success. Although stressors are experienced individually and vulnerability to stress cannot be generalised, the results of this study confirm a positive alteration towards self-perceived control.

Goal identification and goal setting

All the respondents in this study described positive changes referring to how the coach helped them identify and specify their goals and one respondent said, “The coach asked me questions that made me reflect on for example how a day was, it made me structure my day and my thoughts”. This quotation shows a self-talk process which includes goal setting and time management (goal identification) through a reflective process (metacognition). According to Flavell (1979), metacognitive knowledge can lead to metacognitive experiences, such as cognitive goals and bring forth revision or abandonment of old goals and establishment of new goals. Research has confirmed that self-regulatory processes, such as self-monitoring, self-evaluating and goal setting, are highly predictive of students' achievement (Zimmerman and Schunk, 2001) and development of goal-oriented skills improves students' confidence in achieving new goals (Prenda and Lachman, 2001).

Most respondents in the study described how a change of focus and new perspectives led to new insights in what their obstacles were and what skills they wanted and needed to develop to deal with these obstacles. However, some students did not describe these themes explicitly. They talked about how development and use of new techniques, such as positive self-talk, more structure and better planning, led to better overview and higher level of implementation, in total a more goal-oriented behaviour. Research has shown that students are more likely to achieve concrete personal goals than goals in abstract terms (Höchli *et al.*, 2018). Alessandri *et al.* (2020) claimed that self-set specific goals of moderate difficulty are associated with higher performance and it seems like this is exactly what the respondents described in the interviews; goals that provided a sense of meaning hence contributed to the feeling of having a specific and useful purpose in their everyday lives (Emmons, 1999).

Strategies

Most respondents described an increased sense of control that made them more relaxed, while the remaining respondents did not explicitly address this theme during the interviews.

Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1999) stated that students who manage to self-regulate their goals and self-monitor their goal attainment are more likely to attribute the outcomes to personal and controllable strategies than students who do not master these skills. One respondent in the interviews said, “The outcome of the coaching is that my metacognitive skills have improved. I now have a plan on what to do. I put a greater trust in myself. Lower my shoulders. I am good enough”.

Flavell (1979) suggested that improvement of metacognitive knowledge affects the development of strategies as it helps individuals to select, evaluate, revise and abandon strategies based on one’s own abilities and interests. In this study, the respondents’ new strategies manifested in the form of new routines, such as better planning, which led to better time management and better structure, which led to improved control over school work and everyday life, as well as better study techniques that made the respondents more confident and more relaxed. Another respondent said,

I cleaned up a bit – lowered my shoulders, thinking: I can take one day at a time. Follow a plan – we talked about how to set up everyday studies in a way I can utilise all three years, because it works for me – and I believe I can carry through – I have some strategies.

Many respondents in the study described a positive change in the balance between their daily workload, leisure time activities and time spent with family. However, one of the students said that the coaching sessions provided new insight into strategies of how to balance the student role with other activities but questioned their own ability to mobilise the energy and effort required to apply the new strategies.

By achieving this balance, Landsman-Dijkstra *et al.* (2006) claimed that students will become more physically and socially active and at the same time find opportunities to recover. Howlett *et al.* (2021b) described similar findings, as the results in their study indicated that students’ use of metacognitive strategies improved engagement in various areas in life, even though they were targeted to improve academic performance. This study shows that the respondents experienced many common features, described as different forms of non-productive strategies. Academic coaching helped them change these strategies, by developing new alternative skills towards more productive academic behaviour (Stelter and Law, 2010). Development of new strategies are needed to solve new tasks and students who are familiar with different strategies for learning, thinking and problem solving will be more likely to use them (Pintrich, 2002).

Coach role

Coaching provides targeted support in a one-on-one interaction, which may bring up sensitive subjects and the double role as coach and lecturer in this study may have put both parts in a difficult position. Therefore, we decided to ask about advantages or disadvantages associated with having a lecturer as coach. The entire group stated that it was “no problem for me”, implying that it could possibly be so for others. Several respondents also referred to the duty of confidentiality and that they were confident the coach complied with this. One of the respondents said, “It was a positive experience – did not feel threatened in any way and I felt protected if I was to bring up any confidential topics . . . she was very understanding . . . I felt taken care of”.

Respondents’ responses also suggested an advantage in having a coach who was familiar with their curriculum and knew what was expected of them. One respondent said, “There was no problem having my lecturer as my coach. She is a professional – I thought it went very well – she knows a bit about what we are in right here and now”.

Luthar (2015; see also Luthar *et al.*, 2000) argued that having a significant person is a factor that helps students identify several metacognitive and cognitive coping factors that increase wellbeing, but that does not necessarily include the coach–student relation.

Summary

The main findings in this study revealed that, through academic coaching, the respondents learned important psychological processes, received emotional support, experienced increased self-regulation and improved study mastery and implementation ability, which not only helped the respondents cope but also helped build self-efficacy that contributed to antecedent-focused strategies. The study identified positive changes in cognitive processes, metacognition, goal achievement, social relations and general wellbeing.

In any learning process, self-knowledge is an important facilitator and students who know their own strengths and weaknesses can adjust their cognition and thinking to adapt diverse tasks and facilitate learning (Pintrich, 2002). Metacognitive knowledge of different learning strategies provides the ability to transfer the knowledge gained in one setting or situation to another (Bransford *et al.*, 1999) and Howlett *et al.* (2021b) suggested that academic coaching may serve to foster development of self-regulated learning skills, such as metacognition outside the classroom environment. The findings in this study suggested that academic coaching positively impacted respondents' self-perceived performance and wellbeing and the interviews confirmed the purposes (self-assessment, reflection, goal setting) of academic coaching for student development.

Conclusion

So, how do Norwegian students describe their experiences with academic coaching? This pilot study aimed to identify and describe how academic coaching may influence and improve academic achievement, by exploring a new approach. The study showed that academic coaching has the potential to help students attain scholastic achievement goals and positively influence the necessary cognitive processes needed to cope with everyday scholastic challenges. Seeing that students constantly are confronted with new tasks that require knowledge and skills they have not yet learned, where they lack prior knowledge and skills (Pintrich, 2002), these issues need to be addressed. In general, school systems require that students take more responsibility for their own learning process in higher education (Zimmerman, 2002) and Greene (2017) suggested that educators should strive to create environments that encourage development of self-regulatory knowledge and skills as the rewards are promising for students who engage in the hard work of developing such knowledge and skills. Academic coaching is a cost effective and easily deliverable method that is not reliant on subject expertise, which allows any trained practitioner to help students increase their performance.

The conclusion is that more systematic approaches, which specify and identify psychological factors more explicitly, are needed to establish more validated effects of academic coaching. A suggestion is to explore more detailed and contextualized information about self-awareness and self-observation to find out how respondents utilise this new self-information. Another angle is to explore more complex metacognitive and cognitive processes, as described in Flavell's (1979) taxonomy of metacognition (Padmanabha, 2020), related to self-regulation. Also, the coach role needs to be investigated more thoroughly; as Katz and Shahar (2015) pointed out, teacher support seems to be especially important to students who express high levels of needs. Finally, the long-term effects should be examined since this is not seen in any research on academic coaching and follow-up studies could provide answers to potential long-term benefits of academic coaching. This pilot study gives some promising results that should be explored further in future research.

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