

Coaching at Work

“pp30-32 – Study Aids – a case study of King’s College London University”

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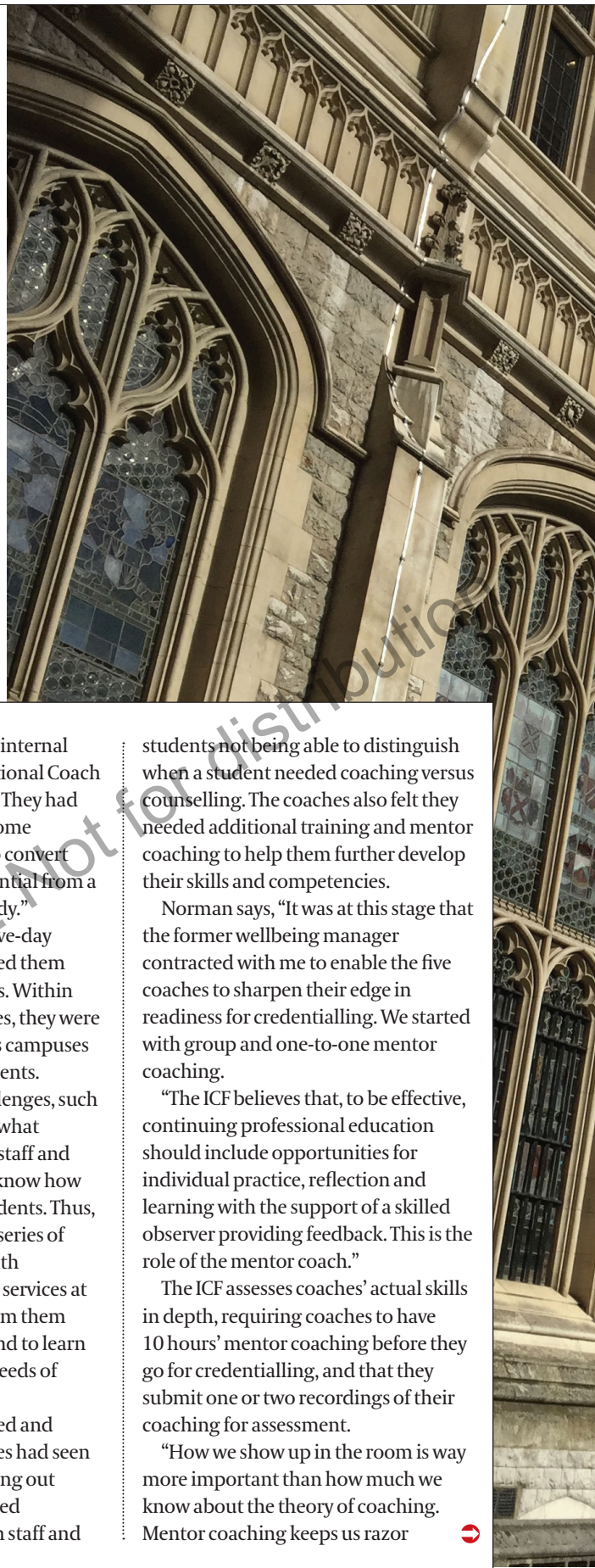
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Study Aids

King's College London University is professionalising internal coaching to offer high-quality student support



King's College London University has successfully turned to coaching to better support its students to thrive through their time at university and has invested in professionalising its coaching service.

Academic support manager, Wilna Gracias, says, "Wellbeing coaching was introduced at King's as a response to the growing need to support student mental health.

Without a preventive and proactive support service for students, the counselling service was inundated with applications from students, many of whom did not need therapeutic support. At the time, the director of student services felt wellbeing coaching would help students develop the skills and strategies to address their wellbeing needs early before challenges turned into crisis."

Independent coach and mentor coach, Clare Norman, was later brought in to help the university professionalise its internal coaching offer. She says, "My part in this story started when Wilna's predecessor asked me how I

might support her and four internal coaches to get their International Coach Federation (ICF) credential. They had previously participated in some training, but now wanted to convert that into a recognised credential from a well-respected coaching body."

Five coaches attended a five-day training course, which helped them develop their coaching skills. Within months of starting their roles, they were dispatched across the King's campuses to begin coaching with students.

This presented some challenges, such as lack of understanding of what coaching could offer. Many staff and students on campus didn't know how coaching could support students. Thus, the coaches embarked on a series of roadshows and meetings with academics and professional services at the various faculties to inform them about its coaching service and to learn more about the wellbeing needs of specific cohorts of students.

Coaching was well-received and within a year, the five coaches had seen 300 students. However, rolling out wellbeing coaching still posed challenges, particularly with staff and

students not being able to distinguish when a student needed coaching versus counselling. The coaches also felt they needed additional training and mentor coaching to help them further develop their skills and competencies.

Norman says, "It was at this stage that the former wellbeing manager contracted with me to enable the five coaches to sharpen their edge in readiness for credentialling. We started with group and one-to-one mentor coaching.

"The ICF believes that, to be effective, continuing professional education should include opportunities for individual practice, reflection and learning with the support of a skilled observer providing feedback. This is the role of the mentor coach."

The ICF assesses coaches' actual skills in depth, requiring coaches to have 10 hours' mentor coaching before they go for credentialling, and that they submit one or two recordings of their coaching for assessment.

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“How we show up in the room is way more important than how much we know about the theory of coaching. Mentor coaching keeps us razor sharp, enabling us to see our blind spots in practice”



sharp, enabling us to see our blind spots in practice. If we declare that we want to be the best coach we can be for our clients, the only way we can be sure that we are staying sharp is to be observed and given structured feedback related to our competence,” says Norman in her forthcoming book (*Norman, in press*).

“It’s about regularly bringing ourselves back to conscious competence. Never forgetting that there is always more to learn about the practice of coaching. Never getting so arrogant that we believe we have nothing left to learn. Never getting stuck in unconscious competence or indeed slipping into unconscious incompetence,” she writes.

Group mentor coaching allowed the five coaches to see others coach, so they could learn from different approaches. They had the chance to see from the outside what moves the client’s thinking on and what kept it in the past.

“One-to-one mentor coaching allowed them to listen to a recording with me, to stop and start it to reflect on what they did to move their client’s thinking forward – and what kept their thinking in the past. All the feedback – whether from themselves, their peers or me – was tied to the competencies. This structure made it easier to assimilate, as the coaches figured out which competencies they needed to work on and which they were strongest at,” says Norman.

In time, supervision was added to the mix. This enabled the coaches to reflect

on their relationship with certain clients; and given that they were all from the same organisation, to harvest the learning about what needed to change in their system to move clients’ thinking forward rather than keeping them in old patterns. As a result of the supervision, they recommended changes to the structure and process of the coaching provision.

Gracias says, “With a renewed understanding in the ICF competencies and in our roles as coaches, we agreed to use our first session with students as an opportunity to explain the purpose of coaching and allow students to decide if it was the support they needed. It empowered students to make the right decisions for themselves and lessened the pressure off the coaches to differentiate what service was more appropriate for the student.

“In addition, coaches worked closely with colleagues from the counselling service to create clearer messaging about each of the services to help mitigate the number of inappropriate referrals. The coaches also began to collate best practices, activities and models, which allowed them to be more creative and tailor sessions to the specific needs of their students.”

Norman says, “One of the requirements for the ICF’s Associate Certified Coach credential is to have 60 hours of coach-specific training under your belt. These coaches were missing 12 hours, so we designed training to fill the gap – focusing


primarily on the competencies where they felt the least accomplished.”

Says Gracias, “Once we had completed the mentor coaching and the training, and documented everything we had done, we submitted our applications. That makes it sound easy – it wasn’t. But we did it and we all received our credentials.”

In addition, says Gracias, “We felt legitimised by an external body, so our confidence in our own ability increased. We can see the system with a fresh pair of eyes without bias towards the organisation. We now see things through different lenses, and we now model self-care, building resilience and re-energising ourselves.”

NEXT STEPS

King’s is now trialling targeted outreach to specific groups such as students from widening participation backgrounds and groups with discrete needs such as care leavers, estranged students and asylum seekers to further investigate the impact coaching has on wellbeing and achievement.

Gracias is taking her coaching expertise across the university and is developing training for academics on how to use coaching skills to support students through personal tutoring. There is also potential for embedding coaching skills in how students are supported in their first year. 

● C Norman, *Mentor Coaching: A Practical Guide*, Open University Press, in press