



Professionalising the contribution of HE third space professionals – developing themselves to support others

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Abstract

This case study discusses the introduction of a new student support role, the Senior Academic Coach, at the University of Wolverhampton. Firmly located in the ‘third space’, Senior Academic Coaches reside in the liminal space between the traditional academic and administrative roles. Using skills and knowledge gained through the completion of the ILM Effective Coaching and Mentoring qualification, they lead faculty-based academic coaching teams. These teams provide the predominant support that levels 3 and 4 and international level 7 students receive as they transition into and through higher education. Students’ interactions with the Academic Coaches provide them with the knowledge and tools to be successful. Using a narrative approach, Senior Academic Coaches were interviewed about how the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) course supports them in developing and delivering their roles. The findings are delivered via a composite Senior Academic Coach, who relates the transformative impact of the ILM on a personal

and professional level. It was found that the ILM provided the framework which not only underpins how coaches work with students, but also how they navigate supporting their teams as first-time line managers. The ILM encouraged them to reflect on their own development and helped them challenge feelings of imposterism, as well as providing them with the skills that they needed to challenge senior staff as they worked to develop, and advocate for, the role. We close by arguing that there is no better time to listen to the lived experiences of these marginalised HE workers in order to better understand the impact of providing more funding to support these types of third-space roles.

Keywords: third space professionals; academic coaches; student support; ILM; mentoring and coaching.

Introduction

The authors of this paper, academic staff responsible for the creation and success of the role and Academic Coaches promoted to Senior Academic Coach roles, have worked collaboratively since 2018 to develop the practice and evaluation of the Academic Coach (AC) teams. Our experience as a group, drawn from cross-institutional academic and professional services backgrounds, is underpinned by the observation that third space (Whitchurch, 2008; 2013) modulated professional roles are often tricky and neither comfortable nor easy (McIntosh et al., 2021; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). This type of role, despite making up half of the HE workforce, is consistently minoritised in HE policy discourse and is under-researched and under-theorised (McKay and Robson, 2023). Therefore, the voices and experiences of this workgroup are traditionally marginalised (Abeggelan, Burns and Sinfield, 2023). This case study details how the University of Wolverhampton (WLV) contributes to sector debates and practices around the professional development that is needed to better equip those within these hybrid student support roles.

We explore the impact of the Academic Coach (AC) role which replaced Personal Tutoring for new entrants. Our focus is drawn to the professional development given to ACs and how this has impacted their career progression into higher level positions. We recognise that coaching and mentoring can effectively support staff from a global majority background (people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global

south, and/or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'; White, 2024) as they grapple with different hindering career transition points (Pearce, 2022), noting that most ACs are from global majority backgrounds.

As the relationship between academic coaching and personal tutoring has been examined, and a culture shift towards pastoral coaching and mentoring as a partnership with students is necessary (Jennings, 2022), we consider how an emphasis upon 'critical collaboration and co-creation' (Asher, 2023, p. xxxiii) as part of coaching and mentoring might support the development of these third space roles. This particularly considers the support they provide to individuals and groups, as they collectively navigate the risks and discomforts involved in role boundary crossing and breaching. It is hoped this allows for the liberatory potential (Abeggelan, Burns and Sinfield, 2023) for a pedagogy and practice of hope (Giroux, 2018) to emerge which does not leave student success to chance in its adoption of an ethics of care and compassion (Kift, 2018).

We will outline the context for the case study including the pedagogic approach taken to develop the professional practice of these new third space workers who inhabit the 'academic-related' staff category. Their ongoing learning has shaped the AC role, and their contribution within it has led to the creation of a Senior AC (SAC) post in each of the university's three faculties. The case study will draw upon the lived experiences and narratives of the SAC (previously ACs) as they consider what has helped them navigate these liminal professional spaces (Whitchurch, 2013).

Context

The University of Wolverhampton (WLV) is a sector leader in excellence in widening access to higher education and social mobility. It is ranked 1st in the [Daily Mail University Rankings and League Table](#) for its intake of first-generation students (those who are first in their families to attend university). This celebrates the fact that 70.8% of the students that WLV educates are from this group. Not surprisingly, social justice is central to WLV's mission, and it defines itself as the 'University of Opportunity'.

WLV's student population in 2024 is circa 25,825 and is highly diverse. In addition to the above statistic, over 80% of our students commute to university and are most often

students from the global majority (University of Wolverhampton APP plan data, 2024). WLV prides itself on its dedication to student support.

The introduction of Academic Coach and Senior Academic Coach roles

Much of the first-year student support at WLV is led by ACs. The AC role was created in 2018 from an initial pilot of nine ACs in two faculties. There are now 37 permanent ACs acting as Personal Tutors for all new students at levels 3 and 4, and for postgraduate international students.

The role was created to deliberately reflect the student cohort and has recruited heavily from alumni, with 66% of all ACs being recent graduates. The role is carried out between the academic and professional spheres, termed the third space (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 3), as it is performed by staff who are neither academics nor administrators. However, ACs expertly traverse the realm between the two areas to provide an integrative support system for students attempting to navigate and understand HE, and the challenges this brings as first-generation learners. ACs support the transition into and through the university, encourage independence, forge the development of academic learning relationships, and help students understand the nuances of learning in HE.

Through this, we have found that students' pre-expectations of HE are recognised, but where needed are gently modified. This also contributes to students developing a sense of belonging, which is known to impact retention and success (Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). Whilst these roles are integral to WLV, they are unique in the sector. The hybrid nature of the AC role as full-time personal tutor to cohorts of students with a holistic overview of students' academic and pastoral needs is not currently replicated in the same way in the sector. Although many institutions have sought advice and guidance from us to develop their own versions of the role.

Due to the growth and success of the AC role between 2018 and 2021, when the original pilot of nine ACs grew to 26, it became evident that a more senior role was needed to lead, and line manage the faculty AC teams to ensure consistency in the support offered to students and to provide more detailed data and analysis. As a result, in 2021, WLV introduced an SAC into each faculty. This 'academic -related' role is a career development

opportunity for ACs and is the 'equivalent' of a lecturer in terms of pay grade and banding, and provides SACs with line management responsibilities, and therefore the opportunity to use their coaching skills and qualifications to not only support the development of students, but also other third space professionals. The SACs operate as a community of practice integrated into extended institutional spaces and practices. This cross-institutional working positions them as 'complex collaboration champions' (Veles, Carter and Boon, 2019, p.2) who respond in both thematic and intuitive ways on both pre-defined and emergent projects. This oscillation is both constraining and liberating, and further evidence of the shiftiness of third space working. This oscillation will be returned to later in the case study.

Introducing the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM)

The Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) is the leading UK provider of leadership, management, and coaching and mentoring qualifications and training. The ILM is 'passionate about harnessing the power of leadership to transform people and businesses for the better' (ILM, 2024). Over 70,000 people take an ILM qualification each year, with 93% of employers saying that as a result, their managers perform better (ILM, 2024).

WLV has been a recognised ILM training centre offering level 3, 5 and 7 coaching and mentoring qualifications since 2010. These qualifications involve the fundamentals of coaching and mentoring theory and practice, which include planning, doing and reviewing coaching with 2-3 clients, whilst employing reflective continuous professional development. Training covers the key skills for coaching, as well as the key models, tools and techniques to enhance practice and encourage a heightened self-awareness of what works in their context.

As the AC role was being established, it was clear that recruiting alumni that genuinely cared for our students was not enough; we needed to ensure they had the correct coaching knowledge, skills, and confidence to readily recognise our students' needs and to best support our diverse student body. We decided to professionalise their practice by offering training and ongoing support through the ILM qualification in 'effective coaching and mentoring'; initially level 3 and later level 5. This allowed us to recognise the value that

they brought, and benchmark and enhance their practice against the recognised standards for coaching in organisations.

Since starting, some 43 ACs have been ILM trained within six cohorts, with three now becoming the Senior Coaches leading the three AC teams. As well as reflecting on the theory and practice when studying the three ILM units in the 5-6 days training, ACs also attend regular supervisory sessions for bespoke individual support, group supervision through action learning sets and, in addition, are observed and observe each other. Gathering and reflecting on the evidence and compiling the portfolio can be very time consuming, and, as a result, not all ACs have completed the ILM qualification, but all have attended the training and have benefited from the ongoing supervision and CPD work. ACs, over the years, have shared how much learning they have gained and put into practice, from their ILM training, particularly in respect of improving their self-awareness, their application of key models, and enhancing their key skills of rapport building, listening, questioning and goal setting.

One of the key pieces of learning in all six cohorts relates to the application of the key coaching models, particularly the directive/non-directive spectrum model (Downey, 2016). Initially ACs come into the role with a desire to help students, equipped with the knowledge of the best places to seek advice and support from the university. However, they jump from diagnosis to problem-solving for the students, rather than with them. The greater learning, growth and movement for the student is when they take more control of their journey, and become more independent of their AC. The ACs reflect upon this in their ILM training; observing what their preferences are and finding ways to meet the students where they are and guide them towards the non-directive end of the spectrum. This gives students the confidence and tools to solve their challenges for themselves. This takes time but is worth the investment for both AC and student learning. This is also relevant to the Acs' learning. Allowing them to take control of their own journey into higher level roles.

In the next section, we will provide a short case study delivered through the lens of narrative enquiry. This draws from the narratives of three SACs and highlights the motivations and applied ILM learning that have supported them in their hybrid, 'third space' student support roles.

Case study methodology

This narrative case study was generated from online reflective interviews with SACs at WLV, which were conducted by three of the authors (Jones, Hughes and Cureton). The interviews were approximately one hour long, and the SACs were asked four previously agreed grand narrative prompt questions. The questions focused on the ILM, their SAC role, barriers and facilitators, and areas for celebration. The prompts were shared with the SACs before the interview, to give them time to reflect on their experiences before sharing their stories.

As the SAC role is unique, and sharing demographic details would allow for the identification of the SACs involved in this case study, the decision was made to generate a composite narrative for an SAC from the shared data. To this end, we provide no further details of the coaches who were interviewed. Composite narratives are a recognised method of affording participant anonymity (Willis, 2019). However, as a relatively new approach, there have been criticisms, which focus on the perceived lack of transparency that is intrinsic to the method (Johnston, Wildy and Chand, 2023). We countered these criticisms by using a standardised approach (see below) and keeping an audit trail of all decisions that were made.

Composite narratives communicate the common experiences within a set of interviews through a story generated by interweaving themes and illustrative quotes to form a vignette (Sajadi, 2022). The composite narrative used in this case study was developed using the six step method (Johnston, 2024). The data from the interviews were analysed by one researcher using thematic analysis. The themes were reviewed by the other two researchers to ensure clarity and to reduce bias. The themes were then used to develop a narrative thread (steps 1 and 3 of Johnston's, 2024 approach) and was populated with experiences. The experiences were illustrated with quotes, and an effort was made to ensure quotes from all SACs were included (steps 2 and 4). The draft composite narrative was reviewed and edited to form a coherent story (step 5) and assigned a title (step 6).

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's School of Education Ethics Committee, participant information was shared, and informed consent was given by all parties.

The results: composite narrative

The ILM is transformative

Isaac is 28, of mixed heritage and a university alumnus. They have been a Senior Academic Coach for about two years. Before their appointment to the role, Isaac had been an Academic Coach, joining as part of the second cohort of coaches, a year after the role was introduced to the university:

I think back to my degree; the plan was never to get into this, but I felt like being here and having experiences I have had have been really important because it's allowed me to bring a completely different perspective from things and it's also to me, a testament to what is possible for all the students.

Isaac's experiences of being a student and supporting other students as part of their internship sparked the drive to make a difference in the futures of students like them. Applying for an academic coach position had seemed like a logical step:

of the key traits you need to have to be a successful and a good academic coach is to care. And I think that's one of the very clear attributes. I think we all look for in the coaches and it's evident in the coaches as they are people who actively want to make a difference, and I think that's what the role does.

The ILM is woven through everything we do

Isaac, however, recognises that caring is not enough and discusses how the Institute of Leadership and Management Level 5 in Effective Coaching and Mentoring qualification has been a thread through everything that they do. They feel that the ILM has been transformative:

I think it's similar to like what we do with our students. It's transforming people. The way that we operate, it transformed people, we try, it's [the ILM] transformed me.

Contemplating this notion, Isaac reflects that the ILM transformed them both personally and professionally. On a personal level, Isaac remarked:

I definitely had that imposter syndrome being in this environment and then obviously for the first couple of months getting stuck into the role and you know having that experience of a role where we may be worth figuring things out. But I think what ILM helped me with was the impostor syndrome.

The ILM not only provides a framework for supporting students:

when I started the ILM training at a couple of months into that first year, and I think that's when I really started to understand the role and my place and understand be able to reflect on my own practice. I think I've realised that I use ILM in my everyday life now. Not just in my coaching interactions with students, but so many of the principles are things that I can apply as a manager now.

it also provides the foundation for how Issac approached leadership as someone new to line management, and how they now led their team.

I hadn't really thought about how I'd applied my coaching from ILM to my Senior AC role, but that kind of stuck out to me. Because I see my role now as almost coaching the academic coaches, so they're able to get support and develop themselves personally and professionally.

The ILM underpins professional interactions

Returning to discussions about how the ILM makes a difference to their practice, Isaac notes how the ILM permitted them to challenge the status quo in order to shape a new role so that it is effective and impactful:

And with the way that we do things, it's kind of challenging the status quo.... The area that we operate at the university in that kind of unknown space between our academic staff and our professional staff. We kind of actually, we've got to shape something. So we've got a framework, we've got practices, we've got methodologies; let's use that to shape what we do and the culture of it, which I think is really important.

As with all new roles, embedding it has taken time and there are some areas where staff are reluctant to accept it, but the ILM has provided the skills and confidence to challenge and advocate the strength and benefits of the role:

They're accepted as being positive roles and roles that are needed and but there are some aspects where I think they're not, maybe still not embedded as much as they should be.... the benefit of it [the ILM] as well too because I think of my confidence of going into spaces now with senior members of staff and being able to talk the way I do and challenge them the way I do has come from being able to take a breath and use the ILM training and *developing the skills around being empathetic and understanding and listening*.

It seems clear through the lens of Isaac, that the ACs are motivated towards their role as they care (Kift, 2018) and want to make a clear difference. Recognising that they work within an 'unknown space' and need to find a way to shape their role within the tricky uncomfortableness (Whitchurch, 2008; 2013) and to demonstrate the importance of their role to others, the ILM has given them the framework and the principles to do this. It has helped to set the boundaries (Abeggelan, Burns and Sinfield, 2023) and actively shape what they do. They see their role as helping students to help themselves to make changes and to transform their thinking. What they have learned through the ILM gives them the tools to do this. In fact, they propose that the ILM has transformed their actions personally and professionally. They note how it has helped them recognise and move away from their own imposter syndrome, which could reduce the success of building critical collaborations (Velas, Carter and Boon, 2019; Abeggelan, Burns and Sinfield, 2023) with senior members of staff, which is key to the success of partnering and supporting students. They use these reflections to help recognise this within their students too. As a result, they have used the principles learned to shape their interactions with students but also to shape their own career progression into their management positions. In short, they have recognised the importance of using a coaching style for themselves, their students and their own AC team.

Conclusion

The key contribution of this study is to share that a (Senior) Academic Coach approach, beyond the traditional personal tutor type role, works; it clearly benefits the students, the staff and all those involved. ILM has provided an effective framework which not only underpins how ACs work with students but has also shaped how Senior ACs navigate supporting their teams as first-time line managers. Our recommendation is that this approach could easily be adopted by other HEIs as a valid way to address current issues with more traditional personal tutoring models expressed in the literature (McIntosh et al., 2021; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022) and faced by many HEIs across the sector.

In addition, there is currently a 'perfect storm' (Adia, 2024) within the HE sector, which is generated by static tuition fees, increasing costs, needing more from less and conflicting government policy. Whilst the current or new government may wish to consider the viability of a social mobility premium to better support students from diverse backgrounds, there is

no better time to listen to, value and better support the lived experiences of marginalised HE workers. If more funding is available, those in third space professional roles are best placed to make an early impact through straddling the complexities of working with colleagues and working with students simultaneously.

As Kift (2018) emphasises in her transition pedagogy, we believe that we have a duty of care to our students, and we should not leave their success to chance. Equally, the more senior members of this writing team have a duty of care to nurturing and coaching the Senior ACs who in turn offer this personalised approach to their own teams. The ACs, with their fingers on the pulse of the student experience, know what works. We, as senior staff, mentors and coaches, can help them maximise their potential, and, as a result, they can maximise the potential of their students through guidance from the ILM framework, supporting their professional development and ultimate career progression. They care and we care.

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