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## **A Report on a Pilot Study into Using Coaching to Support ‘Sixth Form’ Students (Aged 16 to 18) in England**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents findings from an early-stage pilot study investigating how coaching can support students aged 16–18 in England. As part of a wider comparative project involving England and Canada, this first paper focuses on the English context, drawing on semi-structured interviews with two students at a sixth form college in the East Midlands region of the United Kingdom. The study examines how coaching influences learning strategies, motivation, confidence, and overall well-being during the critical two-year stage between the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) exams at age 16 and A-Level exams at age 18. Sixth form students face high-stakes assessments alongside increased autonomy and responsibility for their learning. Coaching, distinguished from traditional mentoring or tutoring by its emphasis on questioning, reflection, and goal-setting, offers a structured yet personalized approach to supporting academic and personal development. Findings from the pilot indicate that coaching positively impacted students’ attainment by fostering self-assessment, and practical study strategies, while also enhancing confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience. Participants highlighted coaching as a mechanism for stress management, workload planning, and coping with the pressures of study. Additionally, peer-led support emerged as a potentially effective model to strengthen engagement, belonging, and motivation. This study contributes to the growing evidence that coaching can enhance both academic outcomes and personal well-being, suggesting that embedding coaching within sixth form practice may foster a culture of reflective learning, empowerment, and sustained student success.

**KEYWORDS:** academic coaching, sixth form, stress management, student voice

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## Introduction

This article reports on an early-stage, pilot study that explored how coaching can support students aged 16–18 studying academic subjects. This short paper reflects the first part of a wider comparative project involving teachers in England and Canada, which is designed to understand how young people experience coaching as both academic and personal support. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, this study examines how coaching affects students' learning strategies, motivation, confidence, and overall well-being. This first paper focuses solely on the experiences of students in England and is based on interviews with just two students studying at a sixth form college in the East Midland region of England.

In the English education system, a 'sixth form' is the place of study for students aged 16–18 years old who are studying academic subjects (the number 'sixth' is a historical legacy and has no specific modern, useful meaning). A sixth form has selective entry and is usually either an entirely separate institution to the students' previous school (aged 11–16) or shares a site but is explicitly separated via different common rooms, classrooms, other facilities, school norms and expectations. For example, sixth form students may have more control of their day, as they will have some free lessons for private study time and may not be required to wear a uniform. The two years of sixth form study are commonly called the lower and upper sixth.

Up to the age of 16, approximately 90% of school children in the UK study within a free and comprehensive education system. The comprehensive nature of this system means that there are no gateway examinations, and children of all abilities attend the same schools until 16 years old. There may be school choice within a geographical area, for other reasons, but the schools in the vast majority of cases are still comprehensive. This lack of selection and the related lack of gateway exams has been well-established since the 1970s.

However, at 16 years old, students in England take a series of high-stakes exams, known as the General Certificate in Secondary Education exams. These are gateway exams, in that, results in these define students' next steps and also limit student options. Following these exams, students may progress to study academic subjects at a deeper level and typically in a smaller number of subject areas; to take professional training within further education; or to enter the work force as an apprentice.

To attend sixth form and to continue to study academic subjects requires relatively high attainment in the GCSE exams taken at 16 years old. In any year approximately 40–45% of children successfully proceed on to GCE Advanced level (A level) study. If this is the path taken, students will then typically take their General Certificate in Education Advanced Level exams, commonly known as A levels, after two years, at

age 18. The grades attained in these then decide whether a student is able to proceed to university, and also which university and which subjects they can proceed to.

The school stage 16–18 in England therefore commences and concludes with high-stakes exams taken just two years apart. The researchers of this article were therefore interested in how coaching can help students to manage this potentially stressful transitional period in their lives.

## **Study-site context**

This paper focuses on one case study site: a sixth form attached to a comprehensive school with 1,500 students. The school sits within one of the most economically deprived local authorities in England and serves a highly diverse population.

Two metrics are used to measure and compare relative deprivation in England. These are the number of pupils receiving 'pupil premium' funding and the number currently receiving 'free school meals'. Pupil premium funding is money transferred by the government directly to a school to enable them to provide additional support for poorer students, it is calculated based on whether a child (aged 18 and under) has received free school meals at any point in the previous six years; a free school meal is provided to children of families who have a total annual income of below £ 22 700, per year, based on a one child family, excluding welfare payments, (2025/2026, with this income requirement reviewed yearly). At the researched school, 32% per cent of students receive pupil premium funding, and 18% are eligible for free school meals. Within the sixth form, 204 students study 21 Advanced level (A-Level) subjects taught by 46 teachers.

In summary, the students involved in this sixth are high achieving and likely to be academically aspirational as indicated by successful entry to sixth form to study Advanced level (A level courses). However, a relatively high number, in the sixth form that they attend, come from families living in relative poverty.

## **Conceptual framework**

Academic coaching is increasingly recognised as an effective way to help students unlock potential and take control of their learning (Yehuda, 2015). Unlike traditional mentoring or tutoring, coaching is built around questioning, reflection, and goal-setting (Whitmore, 2009). The coach acts as a facilitator, guiding students to articulate ambitions, recognise barriers, and plan strategies to overcome them (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

Previous research has suggested that the benefits of coaching appear to be particularly strong for students from less advantaged backgrounds, who may lack access to the informal guidance often available to peers from university-educated families (Passmore & Brown, 2009). Coaching can narrow achievement gaps by providing structured support in areas such as study strategies, time management, and emotional regulation (Law, Ireland & Hussain, 2007; Hall et al., 2021; Jerrim et al., 2021).

Confidence and self-belief, key drivers of success, also feature strongly in the literature on coaching. Coaching encourages self-efficacy, which has long been linked to persistence and achievement (Bandura, 1997; Passmore & Brown, 2009). When students internalise a growth mindset, they become more resilient, more willing to take intellectual risks, and less likely to disengage when challenges arise (Lawton & Willard, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020).

Moreover, coaching intersects with an increasing focus on mental health and well-being within England's high-pressure and high-stakes exam system. It has the potential to provide a safe, non-judgmental space in which students can discuss stress and anxiety, reframe challenges, and develop emotional coping mechanisms (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Oreopoulos et al., 2018). Green, Grant and Rynsaardt (2007) found that even short-term coaching interventions reduced depression and increased hopefulness among female students, a finding supported by more recent studies (Bester & Kuyper, 2020).

Universities have embraced coaching to promote student engagement and retention. In the U.S., programmes for first-year undergraduates have been shown to improve academic success and a sense of belonging (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010; Lee et al., 2022; Kuh et al., 2005; Blatt et al., 2020). Canadian research by Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2018) revealed that coached students were more likely to complete their courses and reported stronger connections with peers.

The cumulative evidence points to coaching as a practice that has the potential to support both academic and personal flourishing, to not only promote better grades but also confidence, resilience, and community: qualities essential to long-term educational engagement. However, as has been identified by the writers before (Underwood, 2015; Truong & Underwood, 2023), sixth forms tend to be understudied environments. Practice within these distinctly English institutions, lying between school and university as they do, is often informed by research into schools and universities. However, they are a unique environment, worthy of study in their own right.

## **Research design**

For this early-stage study, the researchers used semi-structured interviews focusing on both academic and non-academic outcomes. The aim was to capture the lived experiences of students and understand their emotional as well as cognitive responses to coaching (Seidman, 2013). The students were interviewed about their experiences of coaching, their levels of stress and confidence, and how coaching influenced their study practice. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, with spontaneous questions emerging as the conversation developed. The study followed the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024). Two individual interviews were conducted with students who had participated in the coaching programme. Although the sample was small, the data offered rich insights into how coaching was perceived and the value students placed on it in different aspects of their lives.

## **Findings and discussion**

In this section, as this is a short report on a pilot project, the findings are presented and merged with further discussion. It is expected that once further data has been interpreted, later papers will explore this topic in more depth.

**Increasing attainment:** both participants described coaching as instrumental in improving their grades. Such reflections echo Law, Ireland and Hussain (2007), who emphasise coaching as a means for students to take ownership of learning. The coaching model encouraged the students to set specific, achievable goals, engage in honest self-assessment, and make concrete plans for improvement. Importantly, they found that the tone of coaching was non-judgmental and they particularly identified as positive, the way that progress was tracked through reflection rather than criticism.

Transitioning to higher level academic learning requires adaptability and independence. Both students spoke of how coaching supported them in gaining focus in a new environment, with new and more rigorous demands. The interviewees found that learning practical strategies such as: time management, reflection, and prioritisation, were central to academic coaching. Both students also acknowledged how their physical environment affected their concentration and mood. The use of structured study spaces at school, combined with the reflective discipline of coaching, helped them build momentum and resilience.

**Building confidence:** confidence and self-efficacy emerged as central themes. The students' accounts illustrated the transformative potential of coaching for self-belief. Oreopoulos et al. (2018) observed similar patterns in post-secondary settings, identifying how coaching fosters a belief that effort, not innate ability, drives achievement. Bandura's (1997) model of self-efficacy explains this shift; the more students experience success through effort, the more they internalise the belief that they are capable.

**Building resilience:** both students identified stress management as one of the most valuable aspects of coaching. They described the pressure of deadlines, part-time work, and the transition to a more demanding form of study. They also described how coaching sessions provided structured reflection on workload and emotional balance. Interestingly, both participants felt that peer-led workshops would also be engaging, as students might relate more readily to advice from those close to them in age and experience. This view aligns with findings in other studies that indicate that school students are more influenced by role models with whom they identify (Truong & Underwood, 2023). A peer-led model could therefore amplify the impact of coaching within sixth forms. They also suggested that peer coaching could bridge the gap between students of different backgrounds, providing affordable and sustainable support. This model mirrors the University of Toronto's peer-coaching programme, where it was found that coached students earned higher grades and failed fewer classes (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2018).

**Building community:** Engagement beyond the classroom was another area of discussion. Students praised the school's efforts to offer enrichment opportunities but noted that financial barriers sometimes excluded them. Trips and events intended to promote community often came with costs that some could not afford. This raised concerns about inclusion and belonging; factors closely tied to academic persistence (Kuh et al., 2005). Both students felt that coaching could help address this indirectly by strengthening students' sense of belonging and purpose.

## Conclusion

This early-stage study provides promising evidence that coaching enhances both academic performance and personal well-being in post-16 education. Students described how coaching helped them set realistic goals, manage time, and cope with stress. They also reported gains in self-awareness and confidence, reinforcing previous research that links coaching with self-efficacy and resilience. While limited in scope, this research contributes to the growing body of practitioner studies that illustrate

how coaching can transform school culture from one centred on instruction to one grounded in dialogue, reflection, and empowerment. The message from this early-stage research is clear: when schools embed coaching as part of everyday practice, students learn not only how to achieve but also how to thrive.

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