

Research Article

Proactive Student Psychosocial Support Intervention Through Life Coaching: A Case Study of a First-Year Chemical Engineering Extended Curriculum Programme

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions in South Africa continue to experience considerable dropout rates of students during the first year, especially those from previously marginalised population groups. The aim of this research was to evaluate how the use of life coaching interventions providing first year students with psychosocial support, influenced their first-year experience. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected through a questionnaire at the end of the academic year, approximately four months after the intervention, to evaluate students' experiences of the intervention. Results indicate that students felt that the intervention helped them avoid dropping out of university prematurely, respond better to failure during the year, and improve their self-awareness and academic performance. In conclusion, the results suggest that the use of life coaching intervention as a proactive means of harnessing student agency, may be beneficial to their academic performance, and in improving their lives in general. The study recommends that further research be conducted to explore the use of small group life coaching for providing students with psychosocial support, and also explore this intervention's cost-effectiveness in different context.

Keywords

Life coaching, first-year experience, student agency, student success, psychosocial support, engineering education

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa continue to be marred with the discrepancies between students' access and success. Progress has been made concerning widening access since 1994; the recent Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) report shows that in 2016 the participation rate of the 18 to 23-year olds stood at 19.1% (DHET, 2019) and Black Africans made up about 72% of entries to HEIs. In 2016, the global tertiary participation rate was 41% (Euromonitor International, 2018). The participation rate in South Africa is lower compared to the global figure. The pressing challenge in South Africa is that of improving the success of students that have been granted access. In his recent paper, Scott (2018) argues that higher education in South Africa has not reimagined itself to serve the students to which it has provided access. Scott (2018) argues that while equity of access has been predominant in the last three decades, it is no longer enough that students have access to a university; it is upon universities to prioritise equity of outcomes. For this to happen, Scott calls for all stakeholders, including the state and HEIs, to provide a way forward. The persistently high dropout rate is a concern in South Africa, considering that employment opportunities and improved quality of life still favours graduates (Case et al., 2018). Moreover, as Netanda et al. (2017) argue, student success is for the long-term sustainability of the universities. As such, innovative support interventions that harness students' agency in the first year and subsequent years are crucial in improving throughput rates.

Factors that Affect Student Success and Associated Interventions

Factors that influence student success and attrition in South Africa are widely documented; these include issues such as poor choice of programme of study, articulation gaps, financial difficulties challenges of socioeconomic status, and issues of non-aligned cultural capital (Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Letseka et al., 2009; Mason, 2017; Mogashana et al., 2012; Pather et al., 2017; Van Zyl, 2016). The approaches and interventions to address some of these factors also vary in nature; they include the offering of academic support interventions such as foundational courses and academic literacies (Conana et al., 2016; Basitere & Ivala, 2015; Davidowitz & Schreiber, 2008) through counselling intervention programmes to improve students' sense of belonging to the university (Mason, 2019), and through a shift towards institution-wide interventions at different levels to devise ways to improve student success (Nyar & Meyers, 2018).

Issues of mental health also appear to be having an adverse effect on students. Bantjes et al. (2016) found that students in South Africa had a higher rate of suicidal ideation compared to the general population, and that this correlates with poor health outcomes. Another study found a high prevalence of common mental disorders among first year students at two

prominent South African universities. Bantjes et al. (2019) argue that more attention needs to be paid to supporting students' psychological well-being as they transition into tertiary institutions. However, Blockland (2019) cautions against universities 'pathologising' student issues, stating that issues such as exam stress, loneliness, and social context from which students come (including poverty and educational disadvantage) may predispose some students to mental illness. She argues that "simply extending conventional healthcare services may not be the most effective way to manage the challenges that universities are facing" (Blockland, 2019, p.1). Furthermore, Blockland (2019) calls for intervention programmes that integrate valuable life skills for students by stating: "much can be achieved through resilience building" and by "helping students to discover, mobilise and develop their inner resources" (Blockland, 2019, p.1). The present study focuses on precisely those forms of interventions that Blockland refers to; it uses small group life coaching to provide psychosocial support to students through harnessing their agency in an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP).

Psychosocial Support and Life Coaching

The term 'psychosocial', according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, refers to "the inter-connection between psychological and social processes and the fact that each continually interacts with and influences the other" (ISAC 2010, p.1). From this definition psychosocial support in this study entails offering students support in areas that are both social and individual during the first year, as many are still dealing with adjustment to university, increased academic demands, and some dealing with academic failure. Aspects of this support involve helping students become self-aware and be conscious of how their thoughts about themselves, their emotions, and their behaviour influence how they see themselves and make choices in relation to their social circumstances. To achieve this, this study uses a group life coaching intervention.

Life coaching is a professional practice, rooted in positive psychology, whose history can be traced back to England in the 19th Century (Garvey, 2011). Distinct from counselling and therapy, life coaching focuses on individual's non-clinical strengths, harnesses these strengths, assists them to set goals, and empowers them with a process of achieving the goals. It enhances life experiences and personal development of individuals (Grant, 2003). The role of the life coach is to encourage, motivate, and help the individual to overcome potential limitations that may inhibit progress. Life coaching has been found not only to help individuals achieve their goals, but also to have a positive impact on their quality of life (Griffith 2005).

Some colleges in the United States use life coaching to support students on a range of challenges such as dealing with stress, academic stressors, relationship issues, and financial difficulties (Lefsdahl-Davis et al., 2018). These challenges are found to have an

adverse effect on making students susceptible to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Short et al., 2010). Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) found that life coaching benefited students with overcoming obstacles, improved self-awareness, attainment of goals, improved well-being, and successfully managing transitions into college.

Considering the reported benefits of life coaching interventions, this study explored the use of a life coaching intervention as a means of providing students with psychosocial support and harnessing their agency, in the context of an ECP with first year engineering students. There are three noteworthy aspects of the intervention. Firstly, it is proactive in that it prepares students for challenges that they may encounter during their studies. Secondly, the intervention is conducted with a small group of about six to ten students – this allows for the benefits of life coaching to be maximised, while optimising the use of resources. This approach may be more cost-effective in maximising student support resources. Lastly, the small group coaching happens over a weekend, a Saturday and a Sunday, outside the teaching time to not interfere with the academic programme. During the weekend programme, students are empowered with the knowledge, skills, and techniques that may help them address their psychosocial issues, and this hopefully minimises their chances of dropping out, and improving their academic performance. The central question is: how has students' participation in the life coaching intervention influenced where they find themselves at the end of the first year? In other words, how has having participated in the life coaching intervention influenced students agency?

Conceptual Framework – Human Agency

The understanding of the term 'agency' in this study comes from Margaret Archer's (1995) realist social theory – the morphogenetic approach. As a theoretical and analytical approach, the morphogenetic approach allows for temporary separation between social structure and the human agency, to examine the result of the interaction on each. The focus of this paper is on how a life coaching intervention has influenced students, and as such, the relevant concepts are briefly outlined.

Archer (1995) refers to agency as the action taken by social agents. This action, taken individually and collectively, emanates from what she refers to as personal emergent properties (PEPs) of agents when they interact with the conditioning effects of the structural emergent properties (SEPs). The ECP, with its positioning within the university and all its associated material resources, is an example of the SEP. It conditions the situations into which agents, the students in this case, find themselves when they arrived at university in the first year. According to Archer (2003), students as agents have the things they care about the most, for example pursuing a degree while avoiding dropping out. They then formulate plans of action, their personal projects, and it is in pursuing these projects that they exercise their PEPs to deal with the conditioning effects of SEPs.

One of the students' PEPs is reflexivity, which entails their ability to hold internal conversations about themselves in relation to their social circumstances, and to make a choice on how to act (Archer, 2003). It is in the moment of choosing that students operationalise their inherent PEPs and act in particular ways. This study evaluates how students' agency was shaped by having participated in the life coaching intervention while pursuing their projects in the first year.

Methodology

The study employs a case study methodology, which allows for in-depth investigation into a particular case. Yin (2003) indicates that a case study allows the researcher to explore the "how" and "why" questions within a real-life context, and pertinent to this study sought to investigate how having participated in the life coaching programme influenced students. The use of a case study has often been criticised, among other things, for being biased towards verification of the researcher's preconceived ideas. As such, the researcher needs to provide all the information that increases transferability of a single case.

Context of the study and participants

As part of seeking solutions to support students with psychosocial issues that often result in them dropping out, the Department of Chemical Engineering's ECP at a University of Technology sought and piloted a life coaching intervention for a cohort of first-year students. The pilot study entailed five life coaching weekend sessions that were conducted with different groups, comprising six to ten students over five months during the academic year. The selection criteria for each session were based on responses to a background information questionnaire completed by 25 students at the start of the year, together with their performance in the first Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry tests.

The background information questionnaire requested information on each student's Mathematics and Physical Science high school marks, current residential status, schooling background, information about how they decided to study at the current university, information on how they decided to study chemical engineering and whether it was their first choice, goals, vision, and self-awareness. Sample questions from the background questionnaire are provided as an appendix.

Participants were selected according to the highest risk of failure. The criteria for highest risk entailed whether: (a) the participant lived at a student residence or off campus; a long commute to campus was considered to increase the risk, (b) the university and the programme of study were the participant's first choices, a participant who was not in their preferred university and to whom chemical engineering was not their first choice was considered at risk, and (c) there was uncertainty on funding, fees, and living costs; a

participant who was uncertain about sources of funding was considered at risk. Marks of the first assessments were the final criterion to identify the risk. Participation in these coaching weekends was voluntary for all students; however, those who were at highest risk were strongly encouraged to participate.

At each coaching weekend, participants completed a disclosure and agreement form in which they agreed to participate fully for the two days. The programme introduced students to concepts of the mind, body, thoughts, emotions, and how all these relate to actions that they take, in line with achieving their goals. Following the self-awareness section, participants were introduced to various life coaching techniques. They were individually seated at privately set up sections of the room, where they used the techniques under the guidance of the coach. Other parts of the coaching session entailed improving self-image, personal finance, and creating life visions. After each coaching weekend, the coach set up WhatsApp groups for each group and offered monthly ongoing mentoring for the rest of the academic year. Students could contact the coach privately through WhatsApp when the need arose.

Data gathering and analysis

At the end of the academic year, approximately four months after the last coaching weekend, students were asked to complete a reflective questionnaire developed for this study that evaluated their first-year experiences in relation to the life coaching intervention; the questionnaire is included as an appendix for reference. The 43-item questionnaire consisted of 31 five-point Likert scale items and 12 open-ended items, with 20 out of 35 (57%) students who had been coached, completing the year-end questionnaire anonymously. Critical items evaluated for this study: (a) how the programme facilitated students' adjustment to university, and (b) students' reflections about how they thought their lives might have been different had they not been coached. Data were analysed using content analysis, guided by Archer's (1995) conception of human agency.

Transferability and credibility

The case study intended to provide some in-depth understanding of possible ways of supporting students (Yin, 2003). As this was still a pilot programme, the measure of rigour could be looked at in terms of transferability and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase transferability of this single case to similar contexts, the sample questions from the questionnaires and the 43-items evaluation questionnaires are also provided as an appendix. To ensure credibility, the researchers ascertained that detailed descriptions of students' responses were represented as they appeared during data gathering.

Ethical clearance and researcher positioning

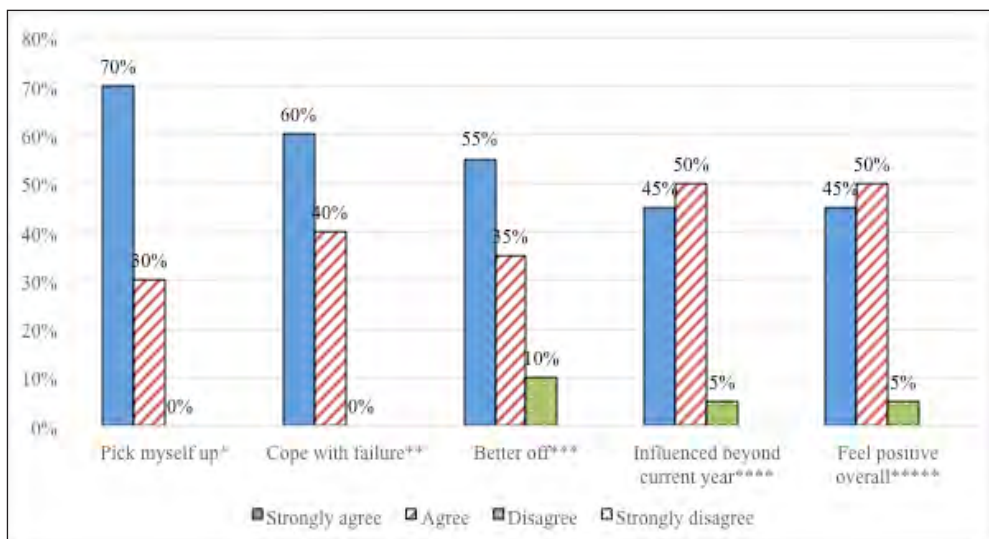
The larger study from which this paper resulted was granted ethical clearance by the Faculty of Engineering at the same institution. All participants in this study consented to participate, and the nature of the questionnaire ensured that they remained anonymous. It is noteworthy that the first author, a chemical engineering graduate, is the life coach who facilitated the coaching groups and developed the questionnaire together with the co-author.

Results

The purpose of the life coaching intervention was to support students; to harness their agency as they made their way through the first year. This paper reports on the year-end evaluation of students' reflection. The results of students' reflections indicate that the weekend life coaching sessions, and the ongoing support that the coach provided to students through WhatsApp social medium, had an overall positive influence on students first-year experience.

Figure 1 shows a summary of the quantitative results. It indicates that apart from one participant in each category, all students felt positive about their academic performance compared to when the year started. Students believed the coaching would influence them beyond the first year, with 18 out of the 20 participants believing that they were better off compared to other first-year students who had not participated in the psychosocial support intervention. More importantly, all participants indicated that having been coached, helped them cope better with failure, and know how to pick themselves up from unsatisfactory performance in their courses.

Figure 1: Students' reflections on their experience with the life coaching intervention



- * Coaching helped me know how to pick myself up better after unsatisfactory performance in my assessments.
- ** Coaching helped me learn to cope better with failure and life.
- *** I believe that I am better off overall compared to another first-year students who have not been coached.
- **** I believe that coaching will influence me beyond this year, no matter what I decided to do with my life.
- ***** Overall, I feel positive about my performance compared to when the year started, before I was coached.

Overall, data presented in Figure 1 suggest that the life coaching intervention had a positive aggregated effect on the students' first-year experiences; however, to elucidate nuances of the positive effect qualitative data that focuses on participants' reflexive deliberations is presented. Two critical questions that they were asked to reflect on were: 1) how has participating in the life coaching support programme influenced your transition to university life? and, 2) had you not been coached at all this year, how do you think your experience might have been different?

Deliberation on the role of life coaching in their adjustment to university life

Students reflected on how the intervention assisted their transition from high school into university in three categories. The first category included a group of students for whom the intervention assisted in dealing with factors outside of the classroom context, which might have impacted negatively on their academic performance. Referring to his well-being, one student indicated that being coached showed him that 'it is possible to achieve everything when external factors are taken into consideration.' Another student indicated that coaching helped him feel 'emotionally stable' and thus empowered him to approach his studies effectively, knowing that he can always talk to the coach on WhatsApp if he encountered a problem. For another student, having been coached helped him 'have inner peace and make peace with everything' that he could not change about his life; this in relation to dealing with some of 'the negative emotions' that might have affected his studies.

The second category included a group of students to whom the intervention fostered their ability to interact with their peers, and to build a sense of belonging in the group. For one student, having been able to work with her peers in a small group helped her with building confidence and communicating:

Student 6: *I've worked in a group when I was told to do so in the coaching programme, I gained a lot of confidence and communication skills which makes me to want to be in working group members even in coming years.*

First year students often feel alone and do not know how to begin relating to their peers; leaving some feeling alienated. Although the life coaching programme does not involve many group interaction activities, the students' reflections indicate that some of them benefited from the few moments in which they were asked to interact with others, and this helped them break barriers to communicate and encourage them to work with their peers beyond the coaching programme. One student indicated that being coached helped her to allow herself to 'blend in without feeling pressure to change' who she was. Another student indicated that not only did coaching help him interact with his peers, but it helped him adapt his way of interacting with lecturers. For another student, having interacted with someone who had studied chemical engineering (the life coach) 'inspired' her to know that she could overcome her obstacles and make it through the first year and beyond.

The third category included students that referred to 'failure' and how coaching addressed it. Four students indicated that having been coached helped them deal with failure in their courses, especially at the beginning of the year while they are finding their feet in the university: Student 14 captured this sentiment:

Student 14: *It has helped me to deal with pressure and able to accept that failing is part of our lives but I must learn to pick up myself and do better next time.*

In dealing with failure, some students indicated that being coached helped them deal with the fear of failure in general, and to understand that failure is temporary. The experience of feeling like a failure, and feeling alone away from support systems in their home environments, is common among first-year students. One student reflected how life coaching helped in this regard:

Student 18: *It (psychosocial support through life coaching) has made me realise that I am not alone. Even though I am (away) from home, I can still create a homely environment for myself here. It made me realise that it is okay to fall but it's very much important to rise up and dust yourself and move on. I failed my first tests but I was amongst the top 5 students who are top achievers in my class at the end of the year. That is because I didn't dwell much on what had happened at the beginning of the year, instead I used it as motivation.*

This knowledge and self-awareness that students gained through life coaching, as suggested by the student 18 above, helped them to reflect positively on themselves in relation to the potential constraints that they encountered during the year.

Deliberation on how they think their lives might have been different without the coaching

Table 1 presents the verbatim students' deliberations concerning how they believe their lives might have been.

Table 1: *Students' responses to how without coaching their lives might have been*

	How your life might have been different without life coaching
Student 1*	I would have failed or even dropped out.
Student 3*	battle with my emotions and possible failed the year.
Student 4*	I would have gave up in my failures this year.
Student 5*	Be a drop out because my emotional well-being.
Student 6	No improvement in my confidence and communication skills.
Student 7	I would not have enjoyed university so much.
Student 8*	I would have changed courses or dropped out.
Student 9	Marks would be just average.
Student 10*	I would have drowned.
Student 11	I would not have learned a lot.
Student 13*	I would've given up, probably left school.
Student 14*	I think I would've dropped out.
Student 16	Not seen the importance of working with other people.
Student 17	I would not able to manage some university challenges.
Student 18*	I don't think I would have finished the year.
Student 19*	I might have given up.
Student 20*	I think I would have given up in everything.

* *Students who would have dropped out*

Data presented in Table 1 can be classified into two main themes. The first theme, comprising of 11 of the 17 (65%) respondents (those marked with *), included those who indicated that they would have dropped out. Students used different words to mark 'drop out'. While some students used the words 'drop out', 'dropped out' (for example students 5, 8, and 14), other students such as students 13, 19, and 20 used the word 'given up'. Another student (10)

went as far as using the word ‘drowned’ to suggest that he would not have made it through the academic year, sharing the sentiment of student 18 who stated that ‘I do not think I would have managed the year.’ Students’ reflexive deliberations indicate that they were aware that they would have been worse off had they not been coached. An essential aspect of the intervention, as reflected on by student 5, was that to be proactive in supporting students improved their ‘emotional well-being’ so that it did not impact negatively on their academic performance.

The second theme included students who indicated that their overall first-year experience would not have been as positive as it turned out to be, had they not been coached. Students in this category mentioned things such as ‘battled with my emotions’ (student 3), that there would be ‘no improvement in my confidence and communication skills’ (student 6) and ‘not seen the importance of working with other people’ (student 16). The improved self-awareness and skills such as understanding one’s emotions, improving confidence in communication, and learning to work with others are not only crucial in the first year, but may be useful in students’ experiences in subsequent years.

Discussion

The transition of students from high school into university is often marred with non-academic challenges that impact on students’ academic performance. The aim of the study from which this paper resulted, was to explore the use of a life coaching intervention in harnessing students’ agency. This paper reported on students’ reflections about how, having participated in the intervention, influenced their first-year experience. In general, the results indicate that life coaching intervention harnessed the students’ agency in several ways. The life coaching weekend, together with the ongoing mentoring through WhatsApp social medium helped the students adjust better to the university, by empowering them to mitigate the potential constraints of SEPs that might have hindered their academic progress. It helped some to improve their well-being, and helped others feel emotionally stable. It helped others address some of their existing negative emotions. These findings resonate with the findings by Grant (2003) and Griffith (2005) that life coaching may be beneficial to assist non-clinical populations to improve their self-awareness, enhance their mental health, and quality of life.

The results further indicate that the life coaching intervention helped students build a sense of belonging in the university, by encouraging them to develop communication skills, interact with their peers, and interact with their lecturers. This aligns with the findings by Lefdahi-Davids et al. (2018) that this kind of support makes it easier for the student to make the transition more manageable during the challenging phases of life. Lastly, the results show that having participated in the life coaching intervention empowered students to deal with failure in their courses, or helped them know how to pick themselves up after failing. In some cases, as reported by some students, it prevented them from dropping out. The

ability of a student to take on failure, reflect upon it, pick themselves up and move on, signifies the fostering and maturing of students' agency. As Archer (2003) suggests, the ability of students to reflect positively on themselves, and choose particular beneficial actions, are vital for achieving personal projects. Significant to the life coaching approach is that it is proactive; it prepares the students upfront so that they are able to deal with challenges that they face during the year and beyond. Such non-clinical interventions are, as argued by Blockland (2019), needed in the South African context to build resilience in students.

Conclusion

This paper reported on how, having participated in the life coaching intervention, fostered students' agency as they made their transition from high school through the first year at university. Overall, the results indicate that the intervention played a significant role in improving students' experiences in the first year, and ultimately, in reducing their chances of dropping out, with 65% of the participants indicating that they would have dropped out at the end of the first year, had there been no intervention. This finding signified the extent to which students' retention and success is influenced by psychosocial factors, and alluded to the need for proactive interventions that address this challenge.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, only 20 of the 35 students (57%) of those who participated in the intervention completed the year-end evaluation questionnaire, and this might be attributed to some of the students not having access to free internet once they leave the university to go home. Sending the evaluation questionnaire to students on the day they write their final examination for the year could rectify this. Secondly, there may be value in conducting interview-type data collection in the future; this may facilitate more probing in students' open-ended responses that were not followed up. Thirdly, for the wider intervention, 35 students out of a cohort of 48 (73%) participated in the psychosocial support programme. Although students are not forced to participate, they can be better encouraged to take such interventions seriously, as this may help them. Improved participation in a cohort may result in better overall cohort progression and fewer dropouts.

For the broader higher education researchers, the study recommends further research into the use of small group life coaching that may facilitate the transition of students from high school into university. This approach may develop their self-awareness, assist them to deal with some negative emotions, improve their mental health and quality of life, help them deal with failure, and minimises their chances of dropping out. Moreover, the provision of this intervention may best be suitable within faculties and departments in which students are registered and as such, their cost-effectiveness needs to be explored through further research. It is noteworthy that exploring the use of life coaching does not replace student wellness services, but it could complement available support structures within the universities

that are often resource-constrained. If 'equity of outcomes' is to be prioritised in South Africa, as Scott (2018) suggested it should, then matters of student psychosocial support should be approached proactively.

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