Exploring the value of executive coaching to MBA students at the University of Portsmouth Business School

Michele Towell and David Hall

This article reports on recent research undertaken at the University of Portsmouth Business School that investigated the student perspective of the value of executive coaching delivered on the School’s part-time Executive MBA course. The growth in interest of the role of coaching in postgraduate, post-experience programmes, including the MBA and DBA, is perhaps not surprising given the nature of these programmes and profile of the students they attract (Cook, Nichol & Loon, 2015).

Coaching challenge in Higher Education
The role of coaching in Higher Education (HE) is a relatively new phenomenon. Following its introduction in the US, where a number of studies on models and effectiveness of coaching in US institutions have been reported (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; McWilliams & Beam, 2013), coaching gaining recognition in the UK as a developmental intervention, both for academics and students is evident from the bodies responsible for specifying standards for HE courses, e.g. the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2015) and the Association of MBAs (AMBA, 2013), that the development and demonstration of interpersonal, or ‘soft’, skills is highly relevant pedagogically to support learning and application of knowledge. These skills include communication, leading teams, personal leadership development, group-work, influencing others, lifelong learning, and personal development. The Executive MBA (EMBA) is typically described as being transformational - meaning transformational on an individual learning level and preparing learners to transform the organisations in which they work (AMBA, 2013).

Given the expectations of the stakeholders in HE and, specifically, postgraduate, post-experience EMBA courses, and the highly competitive nature of this market, two important questions for providers are: how well equipped are institutions to fulfil stakeholder expectations, and, how can institutions position themselves to effectively compete to attract students given the relevance of personal development in supporting effective teaching and learning? The provision of learner support and development provides an opportunity for institutions to differentiate themselves in a crowded and highly competitive market which demands relatively high fees.

Coaching is defined as “evoking excellence in others” (Flaherty, 1999) and can “enable learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve” (Parsloe, 2009). Coaching has been recognised as a $2 billion per year global market (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006) and is reported as being used in 70% of organisations in the UK with 44% of employees being offered coaching (Global Coaching Survey, 2009; Day, Surtees & Winkler, 2008).
A wide variety of coaching genres, techniques and styles exist which contribute to coaching being seen as a key tool for developing people in organisations. Its use with students in Higher Education is relatively new and there are few empirical studies to draw evidence of participation or success from.

**Executive coaching on the Portsmouth MBA**

An innovative executive coaching scheme was piloted at the University of Portsmouth Business School in 2015 on the Executive MBA course. The scheme was developed as a collaboration between the school and The Performance Coach (TPC), a global force in leadership and coaching development. Engaging EMBA students in executive coaching, using coaches requiring practice hours, presented an exciting pro bono opportunity for all stakeholders. As a result of positive feedback from students who participated the pilot scheme, executive coaching is now embedded in the new Executive MBA course introduced in September 2016, as a component a unit that focuses on professional development.

**Research aim and objectives**

This interim research set out to establish the value of the pilot executive coaching scheme from a student perspective, investigating the benefits (or otherwise) that have been experienced by students who engaged in the scheme. Insight into these students’ attitudes wards executive coaching in future was also explored.

The findings were based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with six students who are currently studying for the MBA. The key research questions are:

1. What is the perceived value of coaching as an educational development intervention?
2. What is the perceived value of coaching as an intervention for improving performance in the workplace?
3. What is the perception of the value of coaching in a postgraduate, post-experience, higher education learning setting?

This research attempts to provide empirical evidence from a qualitative study on how a group students on an EMBA programme perceived the value of executive coaching based on the aim and objectives above.

**Methodology**

The research adopted an interpretivist approach, utilising semi-structured interviews in order to capture a rich data set comprising participants’ perceptions, views and personal insights.
Findings
The data was analysed around emerging themes. Results indicate the provision of executive coaching in this instance had little impact on the student’s educational attainment. While this finding was not expected, it highlighted the nature of coaching which is for the coachee (the student) to drive the topic of conversation.

However, respondents suggested some non-direct benefits in terms of improved confidence and increasing self-awareness. They reported a range of positive impacts on skills necessary for their workplace roles, for example, decision-making, questioning, time management, and thinking styles. In addition, they recognised the effect coaching had on improving their confidence and their abilities to consider the impact leadership behaviours may have on people in their workplaces.

Finally, the students who participated in this research valued the inclusion of executive coaching on their executive level HE education programme, would recommend its inclusion to others and indicated their support for its continuation.

Conclusions
The provision of executive coaching on the Executive MBA course at the University of Portsmouth is proving to be valuable addition to the development of leaders and managers. In respect of the original objectives of this study the following observations are explored below.

The data collected demonstrates the use of executive coaching as a developmental intervention for improved people management skills, thereby negating the criticism of some EMBA programmes as evidenced by Bennis and O’Toole (2005) and Benjamin and O’Reilly (2011).

However, this assertion assumes participants choose to raise issues relating to managing people. As was asserted earlier, the choice of topic is dependent on the coachee and should not be influenced by the provider or sponsor for executive coaching. In terms of perceived values for improving study skills, or other aspects associated with studying, these issues were not raised within the sampled coaching conversations. There are, of course, other facilities within the University of Portsmouth for helping students with these issues. This was supported by several of the respondents, who also suggested their development of other skills, such as decision-making, time management and questioning, will ultimately help their overall development on the EMBA programme. In respect of the value of coaching for improving workplace performance, there is strong evidence support the use of executive coaching.
The key areas impacted include decision-making, thinking less, questioning skills, implementation of theoretical concepts in the workplace, self-reflection, removal of self-doubt as confidence increases and increased self-awareness, thereby encouraging leaders and managers to consider the impact of their behaviour on others.

The perception of the value of executive coaching included on an executive MBA programme is extremely positive and highly recommended the students who had experienced it and participated in this research.

**Future developments**

The sample for this initial research is small but is a starting point for on-going data collection from her cohorts completing the Executive MBA at Portsmouth Business School. As the programme consists of only two cohorts, there has been no opportunity to investigate any post-course benefits of the executive coaching and its longer term impact on workplace performance. Therefore, it is intended to continue with the data collection and develop a research focus that includes the experience of coaches.

**References**


http://www.nber.org/papers/w16881 National Bureau of Economic search

