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A realist evaluation of 'Coaching the Gap': A coaching intervention for students in higher education

Technical report

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1. Summary

This evaluation is a theory based evaluation of the impact of a small-scale, one-to-one coaching programme at Leeds Trinity University (LTU). The intervention aimed to support students from the 'global majority' who are identified as being at risk of disengagement. The term 'global majority' includes people who are Black, Asian, Brown, mixed heritage, indigenous to the global south, or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities', and who make up approximately 80% of the world's population. In the theory of change, it was expected that the intervention would provide support that is specifically tailored to the student's needs and help them to address the barriers they face in completing their degrees.

Following a realist methodology, the evaluation aimed to understand whether the 'Coaching the Gap' programme supported students to engage with their degree, under what circumstances and through what mechanisms. By interviewing students and coaches, as well as key stakeholders from the university, the study sought to develop an understanding of the intervention factors, contexts and mechanisms by which the coaching programme achieves (or does not achieve) the outcomes. Qualitative data from interviews was supplemented by data on student engagement in their degree programme and student attainment. The evaluation used the student and coaches' narrative accounts to assess whether the coaching intervention created the change students initially set out to make. It also considered the relationships between other contextual and implementation factors with the students' outcomes.

Table 1: Summary of evaluation details

Intervention name	Coaching the Gap
Intervention type	Psychological
Higher education provider	Leeds Trinity University (LTU)
Evaluator	Amira Tharani and Emma Roberts
Evaluation design	Qualitative Realist Evaluation
Sample	15 realist interviews with participating students - Six interviews with coaches - Two interviews with key informants from LTU

1.1 Summary of findings

Key findings

- Proactive outreach helped students engage with coaching. Some students knew little about coaching when they started, but there is no evidence that prior knowledge made a difference to outcomes.

- The student/coach relationship is critical. Coaches used several techniques to build rapport with students, and were experienced by students as 'friendly' and 'comfortable.' This sense of comfort allowed students to open up about their experiences.
- Coaching supported students to achieve their goals through several separate but interconnected pathways:
  - Breaking down goals into manageable steps
  - Having someone to whom they were accountable
  - Developing supportive skills and habits
  - Surfacing and reframing limiting beliefs.
- Students noted that their relationships with lecturers and tutors tended to be distant, but did not connect this with their level of engagement on their degree programme. Coaches supported students to seek help from lecturers and tutors.
- Coaching supported students to engage more in their degree programme. This looked different for different students but included submitting work earlier, attending more lectures and proactively seeking academic help.
- Students' personal circumstances impacted engagement in their degree programme. These included students' and their families' health, bereavement, caring responsibilities and financial difficulties. Coaching helped students in some circumstances to cope, but where difficulties were more severe students tended to step back from engagement in coaching.

Areas for further exploration

- Whether it matters that coaches as well as students are from the 'global majority'.
- How student belonging at university can be better supported, especially student relationships with lecturers and student support professionals.
- How universities can support students with study skills in a more relational context.
- How varying the timing, frequency and duration of coaching sessions may affect outcomes, while maintaining flexibility to meet individual needs.
- Whether and how coaching gains are sustained post-coaching and what supports them to be sustained.

Caveats and limitations

- We were not fully able to triangulate students' views of their own engagement with engagement data held by the university, or with attainment data.
- We did not speak to any students who signed up for coaching and then withdrew before their first session. There are resultant gaps in our understanding of students' circumstances and readiness for coaching.
- We were not able to triangulate students' views on their coaching goals from the interview with the coaching provider's survey of students self-rating against their coaching goals.
- We deliberately set up the evaluation not to collect detailed demographic data on students' economic and other personal circumstances, as this would have been too intrusive and would have contravened ethical guidelines. However, this means that unless students disclosed them in the interview, we do not know about the extent to which these circumstances affected students' participation in coaching or engagement in their degree programme.

2. Introduction

The current state of the evidence on interventions on wellbeing and mental health for students in higher education needs developing. A 2024 TASO report indicated that mental health difficulties were experienced by almost one in five (18%) UK students. Studies have also pointed to loneliness and a lack of belonging as key factors affecting student wellbeing and mental health (Wonkhe, 2019; ONS, 2022) as well as academic pressures and financial concerns (Student Minds, 2023).

This study expands the scope of psychological interventions previously evaluated, which is largely concentrated on cognitive-behavioural interventions. Furthermore, a key contribution of this study is the focus on the UK context, where there is limited evaluation evidence on coaching interventions in higher education, as further highlighted by TASO's Student Mental Health Evidence Toolkit (2024).

This is a realist evaluation of the 'Coaching the Gap' programme, which will contribute to a deeper understanding of the intervention factors, contexts and mechanisms by which coaching can make a difference to student outcomes. The 'Coaching the Gap' programme is one of several initiatives by Leeds Trinity University (henceforth LTU) to tackle the awarding gap between white and 'global majority' students at the university. In 2022, the awarding gap for main campus undergraduate students stood at 13.1%, above the national average of 11% that year. This had reduced in 2023 to 9.9% (LTU 2024)[1] and the University is committed to eliminating the gap completely by 2027.

The coaching programme was aimed at students who are potentially 'at risk' of disengagement, low attainment or non-completion. Students were identified as being 'at risk' via a formal process led by the Student Support and Wellbeing department. Students were then referred to coaches, provided by an external provider. Six online one-hour coaching sessions were provided for up to 30 students, with some additional proactive support.

There are very few published studies on coaching as a mental health intervention for students in higher education settings. Two randomised controlled trials explore the impact of coaching interventions on pre-clinical medical and dental students in Saudi Arabia (Aboalshamat, Hou, & Strodl, 2015; Aboalshamat, al-Zaidi, Jawa et al., 2020). Of the two studies, one concluded that life coaching reduced psychological distress, compared to a control group, and the other that coaching had only a short-term effect on depression and anxiety. Interest in developing coaching for students in higher education has been growing, with key publications outlining approaches to adapting adult coaching models to a higher education setting (Lim et al., 2024; van Niewerburgh, 2012). These are, however, practitioner focused texts based outside the United Kingdom. Though there is much to learn from these publications, it is difficult to generalise them to UK students due to the differences in both the cultural contexts and the higher education systems.

Kovacs and Corrie (2016, p. 59) argue that realist evaluation can be a useful addition to other forms of evaluation of coaching, as it supports a more nuanced understanding of 'the circumstances in which coaching is likely to prove more and less impactful' . In their view, realist evaluation is likely to be of benefit to coaching practitioners who work in complex

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[1] The Access and Participation Plan is available online at:
https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/media/site-assets/documents/key-documents/pdfs/access-and-participation-plan-2024-25-to-2027-28_updated_0625.pdf

situations, and to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Coaching is highly complex and individualised – no two interactions are the same – and realist evaluation takes account of that complexity and provides a framework for making sense of it. As Kovacs and Corrie (2016, p.65) point out, realist evaluation is useful for 'reminding us of the potential dangers of divorcing our interventions and evaluations from the contexts in which they are both conceived of and conducted'.

This realist evaluation, then, intended both to contribute to the literature on coaching interventions in higher education and to support universities and coaching practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which coaching works. Although conclusions from realist evaluation are contextual, tentative and not usually generalisable, they can still be powerful and extremely useful for practitioners.

There is an extensive body of research on the effectiveness of coaching, both using qualitative (and usually practitioner-led or practitioner-focused) and quantitative, experimental designs (Schlosser et al., 2006; Nicolau et al., 2024). Much of this research focuses on workplace contexts, where coaching is common especially at executive levels (Bickerich et al., 2017; Middleton et al., 2024). This evaluation draws on that literature to identify some of the potential mechanisms by which coaching might work, and explore how these mechanisms might be experienced by undergraduate students from the global majority.

2.1 Definitions and acronyms

Global majority - The evaluator team uses 'global majority' to describe the heritage of students involved in this intervention, while LTU officially uses 'BAME' – Black, Asian and minority ethnic. The various catch-all terms for racialised people are all problematic in different ways (see DaCosta, et al. 2021 for more detail).

CMO cluster - Context-mechanism-outcome cluster, a way of describing causal pathways in realist evaluation. For a full description, please see .

LTU - Leeds Trinity University

SLEO - Student Liaison and Engagement Officer

3. Intervention description

This chapter outlines the intervention and the theory of change. After a description of the coaching programme the theory of change is outlined in full.

Table 2: Summary of intervention details

Element	Description
Why is the intervention being run?	To support students of the 'global majority' who are identified as at risk of dropping out to overcome barriers to engaging in their degree programme and achieving their self-identified goals at university.
Who is the intervention for?	'Global majority' students at Level 5 or Level 6, with students targeted because they were considered by staff to be 'at risk' of disengagement (though half the cohort were not subject to formal risk management processes).
What is the intervention?	One-to-one coaching sessions offered online. Students were entitled to 6 sessions, but some students took up fewer and some more.
Who is delivering the intervention?	An external, specialist coaching provider, with coaches from the 'global majority' who hold a recognised nationally accredited foundational coaching qualification.
How is the intervention delivered?	- Coaching was delivered online via Microsoft Teams. - Wellbeing workshops were hybrid: in-person on campus and on Microsoft Teams. - Proactive contact by phone, text and direct message on Teams.
How many times will the intervention be delivered? Over how long?	- The intervention was delivered once, between Oct 2024 and Apr 2025. - Each coaching session was 1 hour in duration. - Wellbeing workshops were also 1 hour in duration.

3.1 Intervention design

3.1.1 Programme design

The programme grew out of a collaboration between an Associate Professor at LTU – who also has a role in the Office of Institutional Equity – and the CEO of the external coaching provider. The Associate Professor has been leading a co-created academic module for Level 5 and 6 students (equivalent to an undergraduate dissertation) since 2021. The co-creation module was evaluated through a qualitative 'world café' focus group. This evaluation found that students who participated in the research benefited from their relationships with the staff co-leading the research with them. They also found their peer relationships very valuable, and found that having a space where they could discuss their lived experience freely built their confidence to

engage in their degrees in other ways, for example in putting their negative experiences to one side and engaging with their assignments. They noted that the space created in the co-creation setting was unusual in their university experience, with a 'dismantled' power dynamic, shared goals and intentions and collective learning across both students and lecturers. This is, after all, the very point of co-creation in higher education, compared to traditional models of learning. Please see Squire (forthcoming) for more detail.

The Professor who developed the co-creation module believed that coaching could create similar spaces for individual students, supporting them to increase their confidence and engage further in their degree programme. The coaching provider had a track record in coaching students in higher education, and although the feedback from previous coaching was primarily anecdotal it showed that coaching had been transformative for some students.

External funding from the Leeds Community Foundation was secured to pilot the 'Coaching the Gap' programme in the 2024/5 academic year. The intervention is also being run because it aligns with LTU's Race Equality Charter Action Plan, the University Strategic Plan (2021–2026)[2], and the access and participation plan (2024–2028)[3]. The university's key priorities over the next 5 years are to evidence improved outcomes for 'Black Asian and minority ethnic' (BAME) students and eliminate the awarding gap for them. This coaching programme aimed to support students to feel a sense of belonging and self-worth and be key members of the university/wider community. The proposed coaching programme supported students from the global majority to realise and work towards their full potential and ability and achieve their aspirations; dovetailing with the desired objectives and outcomes of the university.

3.1.2 Identifying students and proactive support

The coaching programme was intended to reach students from the 'global majority', at Level 5 and Level 6, who were 'at risk' of disengagement, low attainment or non-completion.

Students were identified in several ways. The Student Support and Wellbeing team put forward students who had been deemed to be 'at risk' using the formal categorisation process for risk. Risk of disengagement is identified through both qualitative and quantitative measures, and updated monthly. Risk categories are from 1-4 with higher numbers denoting higher levels of risk. Students at stages 3 and 4 are likely to be undergoing formal risk management processes with the university so coaching is not appropriate for them at this point. Therefore, the identified students were at risk stages one or two.

Students were also put forward by lecturers or personal tutors. Some departments or lecturers sent a mass email out to all 'global majority' students while others took a more targeted approach. The initial longlist consisted of around 70 students. The Associate Professor, supported by a Student Liaison and Engagement Officer (SLEO) from the Student Support and Wellbeing team, then made contact with the longlisted students to explain more about the programme and support them to decide if they wished to participate. From this longlist, an initial cohort of 30 students signed up to participate. Since then, some students have

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[2] The Equity, Social Justice and Belonging strategy is available online at:
https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/media/site-assets/documents/key-documents/pdfs/equity-social-justice-and-belonging-strategy-2021-2026.pdf
[3] The Access and Participation Plan is available online at:
https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/media/site-assets/documents/key-documents/pdfs/access-and-participation-plan-2024-25-to-2027-28_updated_0625.pdf

withdrawn before taking up coaching, and therefore places were reallocated, to create a current cohort of 27 students.

The Associate Professor and the coaching provider held two initial workshops to explain the intervention in more depth, but these were attended by fewer than 10 of the cohort of 27 students. The Associate Professor then made proactive contact to all students, supported by the SLEO, to support them to book their first session. Students were matched to a coach and then used an online booking system to book their sessions. The Associate Professor continued to contact and support students until their first session was booked, and then checked in with them during the coaching programme, especially if they had missed or rescheduled sessions.

3.1.3 One to one coaching sessions

The core of the programme was the one-to-one coaching offered by the external provider. Students were allocated a minimum of six sessions each, conducted online. The frequency of the sessions was at the student's discretion: weekly, fortnightly, monthly or ad-hoc.

Some students who had opted for weekly coaching and used up their six sessions by January 2025 were able to access further sessions (up to another six). The coaching provider's standard model would be to provide 12 sessions for higher education students, but the budget for the programme did not stretch this far.

Coaching takes a person-centred approach and coaches base their sessions on the 'Goal, Reality, Options and Will' (GROW) model of coaching (Whitmore 2010). The first coaching session usually focuses on building rapport and setting goals. Further sessions then respond to the student's needs, with the coach providing active listening and asking questions based on the stages of the GROW model, rather than giving advice. The sessions are goal-oriented and solution-focused. This is the difference between coaching and therapy or counselling, where there tends to be more focus on reframing the individual's relationship with past and current experiences and relationship.

Students set goals for themselves in the first session (usually up to three, but this can vary) and are asked by the coach to rate themselves in relation to these goals on a 0-10 scale. This self-rating is then repeated in the last session.

Students were sometimes set tasks to do between coaching sessions, depending on the student's goals and the strategies agreed between student and coach. Coaches were also given a list of student support services to which they could signpost students.

All the coaches on this programme are from the 'global majority'. This was intentional, as it was hoped that this would provide an opportunity for students to have conversations about race, should they wish to, as well as to experience positive role modelling. It was also hoped that coaches from the 'global majority' would more readily be able to build trust with students who are also from the 'global majority'.

Students could also be matched by gender, if requested. In practice, few requests for gender matching took place. Some students were also matched with coaches who were in careers in related fields to the student's degree or aspirations.

3.1.4 Wellbeing workshops

LTU and the coaching provider also jointly delivered two wellbeing workshops, in November 2024 and February 2025. These were not well attended, with fewer than five students at each

workshop. They covered topics including managing stress, time management, self-care and wellbeing.

3.2 Theory of change

A theory of change explains how an intervention will make a difference. It explains how the activities link to the outcomes of the intervention, and how these may contribute to longer-term impacts. Most theories of change outline the activities or outputs, the outcomes and the longer-term impacts.

In realist evaluation, a theory of change also includes:

Intervention factors[4]

'Intervention' does not refer to the whole intervention, but rather a specific aspect of the intervention that is expected to trigger the desired mechanism or enable it to operate.

Context

Context refers to the background and environment in which the intervention operates, including the physical context of the intervention, variations between how the intervention is delivered, or variations in the resources and belief systems of the participants in the intervention. In this theory of change, we have focused primarily on contexts that vary between students, rather than the wider context of the intervention as a whole.

Mechanism

Mechanisms are strictly defined in realist evaluation as any change in either the *reasoning* of the participants in the intervention, or any change in their *resources*, that then lead to outcomes. Mechanisms usually cannot be directly observed, and have to be understood either through the participants telling us about them or through other proxy measures. In this theory of change, most of the mechanisms are changes in *reasoning*.

Outcome

Outcomes are the desired changes to be brought about by the intervention. In practice, a mechanism might lead to an earlier stage outcome than those desired by the intervention, and then there might be several intermediate outcomes before the ones that are being measured. We may not be able to follow the whole outcomes chain in this evaluation. There are also potential feedback loops between logically later outcomes (those referred to as being 'outside the coaching room') and earlier ones ('inside the coaching room') but these are likely to be out of scope for this evaluation.

3.2.1. Theory of change development

The theory of change was developed following two workshops with key stakeholders across LTU, TASO and the coaching provider. We were, unfortunately, not able to involve students in theory of change development but one recent graduate joined the workshops in their current role as a SLEO (Student Liaison and Engagement Officer).

Between the first and second workshop, the evaluators also carried out in-depth interviews with key colleagues in the student support department at LTU and two coaches from the

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[4] This is labelled 'intervention' in the theory of change illustration (Appendix B) and in the cluster diagrams in section 3.2.3.

coaching provider. They reviewed the original funding bid and information on the coaching provider's prior work with the University of Leeds.

The first workshop concentrated on establishing outcomes and confirming activities. Some mechanisms and contexts were discussed informally at this workshop and then followed up in the interviews. In the second workshop, we concentrated on prioritising outcomes and then identifying contexts and mechanisms.

A first draft of the theory of change was developed in September 2024. This was reviewed by LTU, TASO and the coaching provider. The clusters were further refined through two more iterations of the theory of change. The theory of change was reviewed by an external reviewer in January 2025 and the current version incorporates the comments from the external reviewer.

3.2.2. Description of the theory of change

A written summary of the theory of change developed for the 'Coaching the Gap' project is provided below. Appendix B also includes an illustration of the full Enhanced Theory of Change developed by the evaluation team.

Problem statement: Students belonging to the 'global majority' are at higher risk of lower attainment or dropping out of university.

Aim: To support students of the 'global majority' who are identified as at risk of dropping out to overcome barriers to engaging in their degree programme and achieving their self-identified goals at university.

Inputs: The intervention relies on the time and skills of Syra Shakir, with the support of Ameera Ali, both of whom provide wrap-around care and wellbeing sessions to the students. Delivery also relies on the coaches from the external provider, providing a minimum of 6 hours of support per student for 30 students, in addition to some administrative time. The intervention has support and buy-in from senior leaders within LTU. Some room bookings may be required for in person sessions, supported by the LTU staff, free of charge. Otherwise, sessions are held online and require only internet access.

Activities: The main activity of this intervention is six one-to-one coaching sessions per student, arranged when the student feels they are most useful. Other activities include introductory and wellbeing sessions as well as wrap-around support to help students overcome any barriers to engaging with the main activity.

Outcomes: The intended outcomes for this intervention are that students achieve their self-defined coaching goals and, in their degree programme, that they engage more and that their attainment scores improve.

It should be noted that as coaching is person-centred, there may be some students who, on achieving their coaching goals, realise that either their degree programme or university as a whole is not for them, and choose to take a different path. While institutionally this may look like a negative outcome, if it is a well-informed and forward-looking decision on the part of the student, then it should not be considered as such.

Impacts: The intended impact of the intervention is that students complete their degree programmes and/or improve attainment. As non-completion is also one of the factors affecting the awarding gap, if more 'global majority' students complete and if attainment is improved, this should contribute to closing the awarding gap between white and 'global majority' students.

3.2.3 Anticipated mechanisms and CMO clusters

This is a realist evaluation, so it aims to test whether certain combinations of contexts and mechanisms support the achievement of outcomes. These combinations are outlined below. In realist evaluation, these are known as context- mechanism- outcome or CMO clusters. In some types of realist evaluation, including this one, specific features of the intervention are also investigated to see if they interact with contexts and mechanisms to support the achievement of outcomes. This means that intervention- context- mechanism- outcome clusters, or (ICMO clusters) are also used.

3.2.3.1 Cluster 1: supporting student engagement in coaching

This cluster tests whether proactive student engagement supports students to take up coaching in the first place or to complete all six coaching sessions, as well as whether it supports students to take up other forms of support offered by LTU.

Proactive student contact - outbound calls to students to encourage them to take up coaching and other support (Intervention)	Where students are not engaging in coaching and / or other student support services (Context)	Students feel that taking up coaching and other support is **worthwhile** (Mechanism)	Students engage with coaching and/or other support available (Outcome)
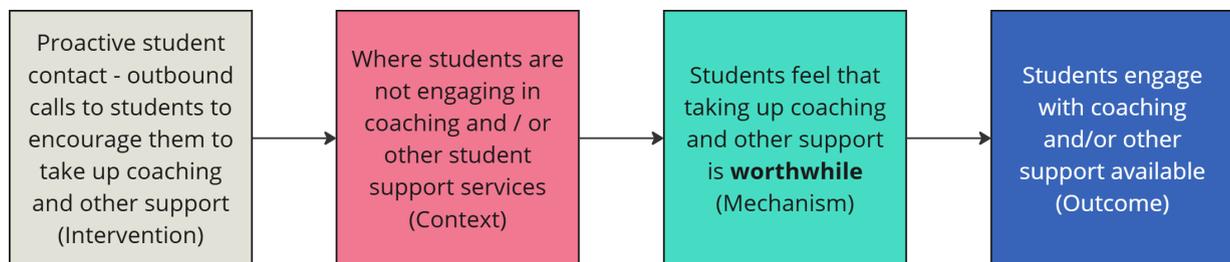
As this cohort is already at risk of disengagement, there is a further risk that students may not take up the coaching offer. They may also not take up the support that is already available to them through LTU. Therefore the proactive student contact offered by the Associate Professor and SLEO is potentially crucial in supporting students to take up coaching (in addition to or instead of other support as necessary) in the first place. Proactive student contact is made initially with all students but subsequently those students who are not engaging are prioritised.

While the suggested mechanism here is that students feel that taking up coaching is worthwhile, there may be a number of alternative mechanisms, including:

- Students know more about what support is offered by LTU.
- Students feel more comfortable taking the first step to contact their coach.
- Students feel more confident to ask for the support they need.
- Students have a better understanding of the process of coaching.

The evaluation will also explore whether any of these alternative mechanisms better explain the role of proactive student contact in supporting students to take up coaching and/or other forms of support.

3.2.3.2 Cluster 2: Psychological safety in the coaching room

This cluster aims to test whether psychological safety in the coaching room affects the achievement of coaching goals, what aspects of the intervention support psychological safety and what contexts affect it.

Coaching is non-directive and non-judgmental (Intervention)	Where students have not previously had non-directive and non-judgmental support (Context)	Students feel safe to share openly with their coach (Mechanism)	Students achieve the coaching goals they have set for themselves (Outcome)
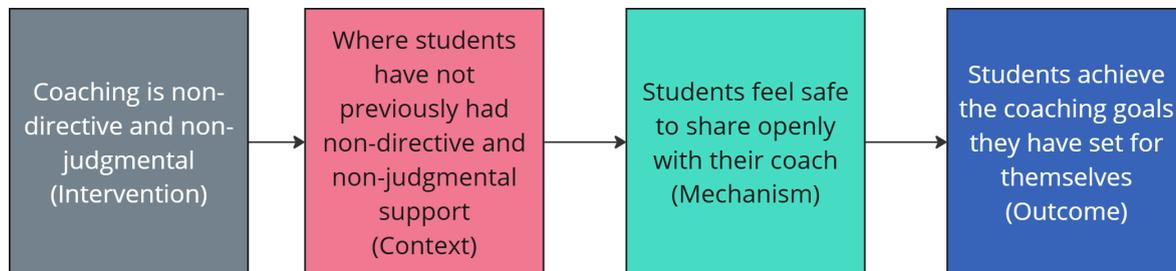
Psychological safety (Edmondson, 2023) is a construct used in organisational psychology to describe 'a perception of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks.' Psychological safety is a predictor of team success in several working environments and is one factor of a successful 'working alliance' between the coach and coachee (McDowell & Doyle, 2023). Within the context of the relationship with the coach, psychological safety is here defined as 'feeling safe to share openly.' If students can share their struggles and joys openly with their coach, they will be better able to engage successfully with the coaching process. Previous student comments from the coaching provider evaluations also highlighted this as a key factor of successful coaching from the perspective of these students. Psychological safety is therefore a key mechanism to test.

We assume here that the non-directive and non-judgmental nature of the coaching intervention is the key factor that supports psychological safety in the coaching room. However, this might not be the case for all students, or it may be that other aspects of the coaching relationship are more important in supporting psychological safety. It may also be the case that different coaches – and different students – understand different things by 'non-directive' and 'non-judgmental.'

The contextual factors that affect whether students feel psychologically safe within the coaching room and whether this leads to achievement of their goals are varied and uncertain. One key context that was important to test was whether psychological safety was more important for those students who had not previously experienced it. Our assumption here is that if students haven't previously experienced a psychologically safe environment and now do, they are likely to make more significant breakthroughs than those who may already have experienced such support.

Other contextual factors that may be relevant include:

- where students are from similar backgrounds to their coach

- where students are willing to take interpersonal risks

- where students are able to participate in coaching sessions in quiet, private places where they cannot be overheard.

Where possible, the evaluation will explore alternative contextual factors affecting both psychological safety in the coaching room and the effect of this on coaching outcomes.

3.2.3.3 Cluster 3: Developing self-awareness in the coaching room

This cluster tests whether students developing self-awareness – i.e. gaining insight into their own beliefs and behaviours – supports them to change, reframe or adapt those behaviours and beliefs to achieve their coaching goals.

Coaching provides opportunities for students to reflect on their beliefs and behaviours (Intervention)	Where those beliefs and behaviours were previously blocking students' achievements of their goals (Context)	Students gain insights into their beliefs and behaviours and how to challenge, reframe or overcome them (Mechanism)	Students achieve the coaching goals they have set for themselves (Outcome)

A key purpose of coaching in all settings is to develop the client's self-awareness and insight (Knowles & Knowles, 2021). As Knowles and Knowles state, clients who develop self-awareness are more likely to grow and develop personally and professionally. A central aspect of coaching, then, is to reveal pre-existing beliefs that may be limiting the student's growth, particularly those that underpin limiting behaviours.

One strategy used by the coaches who will be delivering the coaching is 'past reappraisal' (Rank and Gray, 2017). This involves inviting coachees to review past actions or successes through a solution-focused lens. Past reappraisal supports self-reflection and can also support building confidence and self-esteem. Through reframing their past, students may come to recognise that they do have the skills and inner (and possibly outer) resources to succeed. This then leads to success with their coaching goals. This is one example of how insights into students' beliefs and behaviours may manifest during coaching. Other aspects of the coaching approach, including active listening, may also create opportunities for students to develop insight into their own beliefs and behaviours.

Knowles and Knowles (2021, op cit) refer to 'Aha!' moments that may reveal key insights during coaching. This was also expressed in the theory of change workshop in which coaches referred to 'lightbulb' moments where coachees have revelatory insights. Coaches believed that these were key predictors of coaching success. These moments can vary considerably by individual but are characterised by the student having a new insight or recognising a truth that they might not previously have recognised. These moments are often highly emotionally charged. However, developing insights may not be limited to 'lightbulb' moments but might be more subtle and gradual.

While insight is a key element of coaching success, it may also be the case that students develop, or need to develop, practical tools and techniques for working with limiting beliefs and behaviours. The evaluation will test whether this is an alternative or additional mechanism.

3.2.3.4 Cluster 4: Psychological safety outside the coaching room

This cluster tests whether psychological safety – or the lack of it – in a student's experience of their degree programme or wider university life affects whether they can translate the progress that they make in coaching into meaningful engagement in their degree programme.

Where students' degree programme is also a psychologically safe environment for them (Context)	→	Students feel safe to engage authentically with the material, their professors and their peers on their degree programme (Mechanism)	→	Students engage more with their degree programme (Outcome)

While students may experience psychological safety in the context of coaching, their degree programme or wider university environment may not be psychologically safe for them, and coaching cannot change this in and of itself. Therefore, even if coaching is successful, this may not translate into students engaging more with their degree programme (whether this is in the form of attendance, assignment submission or participation in seminars or group activities). A small number of students who participated in the co-creation research module stated that they usually felt 'invisible' at university and that the co-creation module was a rare space in which they felt they belonged and therefore were able to engage deeply and put the effort in. For those students from the 'global majority' whose lived experience may yield rich insights or critiques of the material that they are being asked to study, it may be the case that a lack of psychological safety inhibits their ability to engage deeply with the material from a critical perspective. This, in turn, may mean that they put less effort in because they do not feel that their views are valued or valuable. This cluster therefore provides an opportunity to explore the relationship between psychological safety and degree engagement.

It may also be the case that coaching does support students to engage more in their degree even if their degree programme is psychologically unsafe. It may be that coaching supports students better to navigate psychologically unsafe environments or ones where they experience direct or indirect racism. Although this is not explicitly outlined in this cluster, this will be explored in the evaluation.

3.2.3.5 Cluster 5: having the resources to engage

This cluster tests whether students with fewer resources in terms of time, money and headspace find it more difficult to engage with their degree programme even if they have had positive experiences of coaching.

Where students have the financial security, stability in their personal lives, time and headspace to engage well (Context)	→	Students feel resourced to spend time and effort on their degree programme (Mechanism)	→	Students engage more with their degree programme
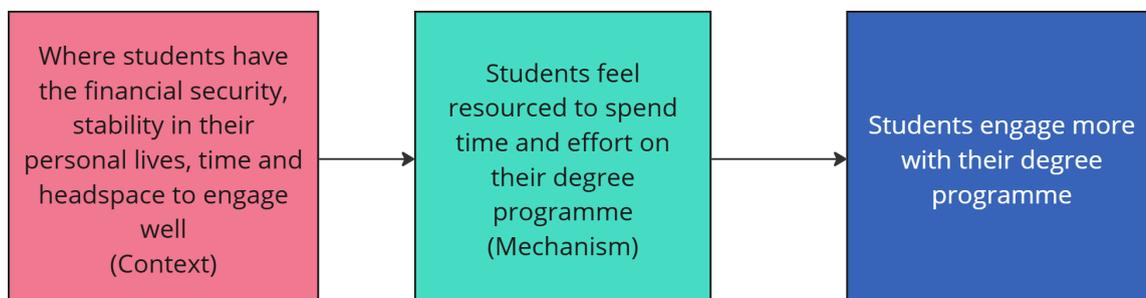
Participants in the theory of change workshop identified that students' level of support within their degree programme, their financial security or lack thereof and their other responsibilities

including jobs or caring responsibilities might affect how well resourced they are to be able take meaningful action, even if coaching has supported them to identify the actions they need to take in support of their goals. While coaching might reframe students' relationships with these external factors, the coaching intervention is not designed to change the external environment.

The students participating in this intervention often have complex lives: financial hardship, difficult family circumstances, health conditions or disabilities and caring responsibilities can all make it more challenging for students to engage with their degree programme. In these circumstances, students may simply not have, or feel they have, the resources to engage well. Yet, as Le Roux (2017) suggests, there is potential for coaching to support students with inter-role conflicts between work, study and personal life and support them to manage or cope with their challenging circumstances.

4. Research design

4.1 Research questions

As a realist evaluation, the primary focus of the evaluation is testing whether the CMO/ICMO clusters are credible and supported by the evidence generated by the evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The overall research questions provide a framework for this, with the bullet points underneath each question providing further information on the specific outcomes, intervention factors, contexts and mechanisms that we are exploring.

This evaluation will examine the following research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: What outcomes are achieved by students taking part in coaching?

- Student achievement of self-defined coaching goals (during the coaching period).
- Student engagement in degree programme (during and after the coaching period).
- Student attainment (during and after the coaching period).
- Other outcomes – potentially unexpected or unintended.

RQ 2: What aspects of the coaching programme make a difference to whether students achieve the above outcomes?

- Non-directive or non-judgmental approach to coaching (during coaching).
- Proactive support to engage students with coaching (before starting coaching and, if needed, during coaching).
- Opportunities for students to understand their beliefs and behaviours (during coaching).

RQ 3: Which students achieve which outcomes, and under what circumstances?

- Role of student gender and level.
- Whether students having previously received support makes a difference.
- Students' other circumstances at university, including financial resources and family situations.
- Role of psychological safety within the wider degree programme.

RQ 4: What changes in reasoning and/or resources enable students to achieve outcomes as a result of coaching?

- Students feel safe to share with their coach.
- Students gain insight into their beliefs and behaviours.

- Students feel safe to engage authentically on their degree programme.
- Students feel resourced to spend time and effort on their degree.

RQ 5: What other factors, apart from the coaching programme, might have enabled students to achieve these outcomes, or hindered outcomes?

- Role of other student support services.
- Role of peers, friends, family etc.
- Role of lecturers, personal tutors etc.

4.2 Evaluation design

This evaluation takes a realist evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation uses a realist explanation of causality which is that outcomes are not directly generated by interventions themselves but by mechanisms that take place within the participants in the intervention. These mechanisms are 'non-observable […] underlying causal processes' (Westhorp, 2014, p. 3). By non-observable, we mean that they cannot be observed directly. For example, one cannot directly observe whether a student feels safe or not, or whether they have a change in reasoning. However, we can infer this either through changes in behaviours or through their own self-reporting of their experience. Although these mechanisms are hidden, they are still real, and they are shaped by and interconnected with context (Rameses Project, 2017).

A realist evaluation takes place in four broad phases as defined by Salter and Kothari (2014). These are:

- Formulating initial programme theory and CMOs
- Data collection
- Data analysis and hypothesis testing
- Refining the CMOs

Realist evaluations are intended to be iterative. Steps two, three and four should take place multiple times during the evaluation.

In this evaluation, we undertook three rounds of analysis and refinement. The first took place after the pilot interviews and formed the basis of the interim research report. The second was less formal and took place after a further 6-8 interviews were conducted. The final round of analysis and refinement was at the end of the data collection process.

The evaluation was mixed-methods, with some quantitative data gathered via administrative information and from the coaching provider. However, the focus was on qualitative data gathered via a series of interviews with students who received the coaching sessions, as well as coaches and key personnel from the LTU team.

As a realist evaluation, the nature of the interviews changed over time as more information on the theories and the CMO clusters were gathered. The pilot interviews were primarily theory gleaning, inviting interview participants to tell us how they believed that the programme worked for them, and what contexts and mechanisms applied in their case. Further rounds of interviews were theory-refining, using a teacher-learner cycle where the interviewer outlines an aspect of the programme theory or a contradictory theory and invited the interviewee to comment on it from their own experience of the programme (Rameses Project, 2017). Please see section 4.3 for further details on the interview process.

It was anticipated that new programme theories may emerge as interviews progress and planned that the interview topic guides would need to adapt to test these theories.

4.2.1 Outcomes

Table 3: Summary of outcomes

Outcome	Primary source of evidence for measuring outcome:
Student achievement of coaching goals	• Coaching provider check-ins with students at the first and last coaching sessions to set and assess goals will provide data about student self-rating against their coaching goals. This was recorded and shared with the evaluator. • Interview will ask about the extent to which students achieved their goals
Student engagement in degree programme	• Management information data on student engagement • Interview with students will ask about course engagement
Student attainment	• Management information data on student attainment • Students may talk about attainment in their interviews when discussing goals and achievements.

4.3. Data collection methods

4.3.1 Sampling strategy

The study takes place at LTU with a pre-selected group of 26 students from the 'global majority' who are receiving the coaching intervention, of which 23 gave consent to be contacted for evaluation purposes. These students have either self-referred into the programme or have been referred by academic or wellbeing staff. Students are at Level 5 or 6 (second or third year of a three-year undergraduate degree programme) and have been identified as being 'at risk' of disengagement. As previously stated, LTU has a formalised process for identifying risk involving both academic staff and the wellbeing team (see section 3.1 for more detail of the risk identification system).

All students were contacted for interview, with 16 of 23 taking part in interviews. All coaches involved in the intervention were interviewed.

4.3.2 Semi-structured realist interviews (students)

Out of the 26 students participating in the intervention, the evaluators (Amira and Emma) approached all the participants and interviewed as many of the students as possible, depending on informed consent and withdrawal. 16 interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted one-to-one, online using Microsoft Teams, and were between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Students were reimbursed for their time. Interviews were conducted up to six weeks after the

student's last coaching session. Students used an online booking system to book an interview at a time convenient for them, including limited evening and weekend slots. All interviews were conducted by Amira and Emma.

Students were asked for informed consent to participate in the interviews as part of an overall consent form, and verbal consent was sought at the beginning of each interview. Interviews were audio and video recorded and automatically transcribed within Microsoft Teams. See Appendix C for the topic guide.

4.3.3 Semi-structured realist interview (coaches)

The evaluators interviewed six coaches - all those who had participated in the intervention. One coach was interviewed twice - once at the pilot stage and again three months later. She was re-interviewed because she had conducted at least 20 more coaching sessions in the intervening period, including with students who had not started coaching at the time of the first interview. These interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and were around 60 minutes in duration. Coaches were also reimbursed for their time. Interviews were audio and video recorded and automatically transcribed within Microsoft Teams. See Appendix C for the topic guide.

4.3.4 Semi-structured realist interview (LTU staff members)

The evaluators interviewed the member of LTU staff who had the most contact with the students and led the proactive student contact. This interview focused primarily on students' contexts and the circumstances that might be affecting both their experience of coaching and the outcomes of coaching. These interviews were conducted in the same way as the student and coach interviews (online on MS Teams and video recorded). See Appendix C for the topic guide.

4.3.5 Engagement and attainment data

LTU uses two management information systems to record student data. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) covers student engagement, attendance and Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle) usage while the Strategic Information Technology System (SITS) covers attainment data including module and re-sit marks and overall degree results. Management information also includes information about the students' level of engagement risk.

The evaluators had access to individual student records in both systems, for all students that consented (23 students). Overall attainment data was limited at the time of writing, but module results were available for all students.

4.3.6 Management information on coaching engagement

The coaching provider collected data from coaches on students' goals and self-report ratings against these goals. These were initially intended to be shared with the evaluators but were not shared in time for the report.

The coaching provider and LTU also also collected and shared information on the number of coaching sessions students had and on any students who withdrew from the coaching programme.

4.4 Research material design

The topic guides were developed by the evaluators based on the theory of change and following a realist evaluation model (Rameses Project, 2017). The LTU staff, TASO and coaching provider teams commented on the draft topic guides, which were revised before the pilot interviews. Both the student and the coach interview topic guides were piloted and revised after the pilot interviews. As realist interview design is iterative, we expected to pause and reflect after a further eight to ten interviews and further revise the topic guide to take account of key emerging findings.

The student topic guide covered:
- student experiences of starting coaching
- student goals for coaching
- student perceptions of the effects and outcomes of coaching
- student perceptions of their relationship with the coach such as feelings of safety
- other contexts and circumstances at the time of coaching
- any other comments on the coaching experience.
- The coach and LTU staff topic guide covers:
- coaching mechanisms that produce change
- coaching outcomes for students
- contextual elements that shape the coaching process
- any other comments on the coaching experience.

The topic guides can be found in .

4.5 Peer researchers

The evaluators originally intended to include a team of two or three peer researchers to interview students, contribute to refining the interview guide and contribute to analysing the data. However, the LTU project team faced unavoidable delays in recruiting peer researchers. This meant that peer researchers were not involved in interviewing, but two peer researchers were involved in data analysis and in contributing their lived experience to the analysis. The peer researchers were not students' exact peers, as they were Masters and PhD students rather than Level 5 or Level 6 students.

The two peer researchers were selected by the LTU project team according to the following criteria:

- Students must be from the 'global majority'.
- Students must either be PhD students or Masters students who are already trained in research methods.
- Students must either have already conducted interview-based research or be intending to do so within their Master or PhD.
- Students should be studying psychology or social sciences.
- Students should not be at risk of failure or disengagement within their programme.

Peer researchers received a detailed briefing on the theory of change and training on how to use the coding software. They then coded the interviews and contributed to discussions with the evaluators and the LTU project team about the key findings.

4.6 Analytical strategy

Realist evaluation uses retroductive analysis: it moves between deductive and inductive approaches, tests researcher assumptions or hunches, and aims to provide the best explanation of the data available (Rameses Project, 2017).

The evaluators used both realist coding and thematic analysis to analyse the data obtained from the primary research with coaching participants and coaches. We used Quirkos software for coding of qualitative data.

In realist coding, we coded every unit of data as to whether it was a context, mechanism, intervention factor or outcome and also coded it against the clusters identified in 3.2.3. A unit of data may be a sentence or paragraph from an interview or a single piece of management information data. Alongside this, we also developed a thematic analysis by identifying keywords and then aggregating these into codes and eventually themes (Naeem et al., 2023). Moving between inductive and deductive approaches, analysed the themes against the original theory of change, and confirmed, refined or refuted the different clusters. The process of confirming, refining or refuting the clusters is an open-ended interpretive exercise in which the evaluator judges which factors are salient by triangulating across student, coach and LTU staff perspectives. We selected quotes from within themes for inclusion in the report. We primarily selected quotes that were illustrative, or that explicitly spoke about a causal link or insight that had been implicit in other related quotes. We also actively looked for quotes that complicated or disconfirmed hypotheses and included these where relevant.

The evaluators conducted a half-day analysis workshop involving both evaluators, all the peer researchers and representatives from LTU and the coaching provider. Within this workshop, we explored the data for Clusters 1-3 and refined the analysis. We also conducted a further workshop with the LTU team and representatives from TASO to explore recommendations.

We used McAllum et al.'s (2019) five types of fidelity in qualitative analysis as a check on our approach. There is more detail on this Appendix A3. The evaluation seeks to adhere to the Quality Standards for Realist Evaluation (Rameses Project, 2017). The programme theory has been articulated in realist terms and used to define all aspects of the evaluation. Data is being collected on each of the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes outlined in section 3.2.3. Alternative explanations will be tested consistently throughout the interviews. There will be a clear quality control process between interviewers including frequent review of interviews and refining of programme theory and the interview topic guide as the interviews progress. Data was analysed by both evaluators to ensure inter-rater reliability when identifying specific data points as contexts, mechanisms or outcomes.

> **Methodological reflection from student researcher Okwuchi Osondu**
>
> Amira and Emma conducted qualitative interviews while Lewis and I coded the data transcribed from the interviews to test causal patterns (i.e., identifying the variability in real-world implementation to uncover why interventions succeed or fail). The relevant guidelines were complied with because Lewis and I coded the transcribed interviews from people we never met and will never meet (we didn't know their real names).
>
> It was my first time exploring the area of qualitative coding; though it was a bit confusing at the initial stage, it started flowing smoothly as I continued with the coding. Qualitative coding makes one feel as though one was involved in the production of the data being coded. I felt a real connection with the students because most of their shared experiences and fears were things I resonated with as a student who also works to pay bills (with regards to time management). I tried to understand the students and why they feel a particular way. Then, as an evaluator, I tried to understand the coaches' different approaches with each student because each coach had her own unique way of approaching the students.
>
> I also made contributions during the analysis meeting from my standpoint as both a student and an evaluator. I stated the fact that most times a coach does not have to force their idea on the students, because most of them signed up to get validation of their already conceived ideas and decisions, while the rest signed up to have access to empathy, and this can be achieved when a coach studies their assigned student right from the first session.
>
> Approaching this from a realist standpoint was the best approach to get the proposed outcome, and it can also be replicated. This is an experience that I will hold dear to my heart because the transferable skills I gained from participating in this analysis will stand the test of time and help me navigate my career path better.

4.7 Ethical considerations

4.7.1 Ethics, race and power

This intervention deals directly with the reality of systemic racism, not just at LTU but in the wider system with which students interact. As evaluators, we also need to be sensitive to considerations of race and power in our data collection, analysis and reporting.

In realist evaluation, epistemic power remains in the hands of the researchers to determine the key contexts, mechanisms and outcomes of an intervention. It is possible to make this more participatory, although in this evaluation it was not possible to have students participate in the theory of change process due to time constraints. Working with peer researchers will enable us to disrupt some of the inherent power dynamics and bring their lived experience to bear on the evaluation.

Some areas of anti-racist practice we are exploring include the following:

Centring care: Anti-racist research centres care by treating research participants as fellow humans with stories to tell. Both evaluators centre care in how we conduct interviews and support participant wellbeing during the interviews.

Prioritising the voice of lived experience over that of the researcher: Checking back with the students to confirm quotes is a minimum requirement in ensuring that their voice is prioritised. We have also considered other ways of ensuring that students' voices are a key part of the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Acknowledging the reality of systemic racism and not having a 'deficit model' of 'global majority' communities: Our analysis will explicitly explore systemic factors, especially in relation to Clusters 4 and 5. We are very aware that systemic problems cannot be solved by individual-level interventions, although such interventions can support people better to navigate the systemic challenges they encounter.

Exploring intersectionality and the variety of experience of 'global majority' students and coaches: We will be careful not to homogenise subgroups within the 'global majority', and take account of how gender, disability, neurodiversity and social class intersect with racism.

5. Results

Summary of results

The theory of change identified 5 ICMO or CMO clusters that were explored during the evaluation. In this section, results are presented by cluster in the same order as they are set out in the theory of change. Each section begins with a reminder of the cluster from the original theory of change. This is followed by a summary of findings and a revised cluster diagram. Detailed findings are presented after each revised cluster diagram.

Key findings

- **Cluster 1:** Proactive outreach helped students engage with coaching. Some students knew little about coaching when they started, but there is no evidence that prior knowledge made a difference to outcomes.
- **Cluster 2:** The student/coach relationship is critical. Coaches used several techniques to build rapport with students, and were experienced by students as 'friendly' and 'comfortable.' This sense of comfort allowed students to open up about their experiences.
- **Cluster 3:** Coaching supported students to achieve their goals through several separate but interconnected pathways:
  - Breaking down goals into manageable steps
  - Having someone to whom they were accountable
  - Developing supportive skills and habits
  - Surfacing and reframing limiting beliefs.
- **Cluster 4:** Students noted that their relationships with lecturers and tutors tended to be distant, but did not connect this with their level of engagement on their degree programme. Coaches supported students to seek help from lecturers and tutors.
- **Cluster 5:** Coaching supported students to engage more in their degree programme. This looked different for different students but included submitting work earlier, attending more lectures and proactively seeking academic help.
- **Cluster 5:** Students' personal circumstances impacted engagement in their degree programme. These included students' and their families' health, bereavement, caring responsibilities and financial difficulties. Coaching helped students in some

circumstances to cope, but where difficulties were more severe students tended to step back from engagement in coaching.

5.1 Cluster 1: Supporting students to take up coaching

5.1.1 Cluster 1: Theory

This cluster tests whether proactive student engagement supports students to take up coaching in the first place or to complete all six coaching sessions, as well as whether it supports students to take up other forms of support offered by LTU.

Proactive student contact - outbound calls to students to encourage them to take up coaching and other support (Intervention)	Where students are not engaging in coaching and / or other student support services (Context)	Students feel that taking up coaching and other support is **worthwhile** (Mechanism)	Students engage with coaching and/or other support available (Outcome)
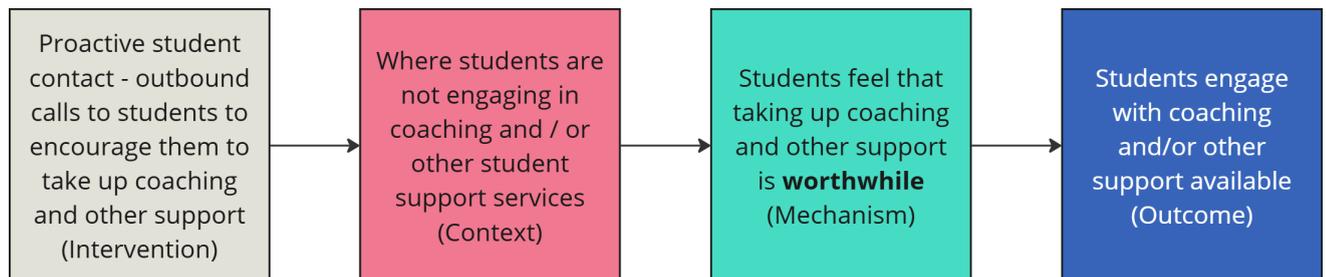
5.1.2 Cluster 1: Summary of findings

1. Students often knew little about coaching before they started, but there is no evidence that prior knowledge made a difference to outcomes.
2. Where there was already a personal relationship with the Associate Professor, students felt more encouraged to try out coaching.
3. Engagement varied across students, with some not starting and several not taking up the full quota of sessions, though others took up more than the allotted six sessions.
4. Most students engaged with coaching when they believed it was 'worth trying' rather than 'worthwhile.'

Revised Cluster 1 diagram: supporting students to take up coaching

In the original diagrams, we had arrows between intervention and context. We decided that these were misleading as they imply a causal relationship where this is not the case. In the revised cluster diagrams we have connected the intervention and context boxes by placing them right next to each other. This implies that the intervention and context together lead to the mechanism which in turn leads to the outcome.
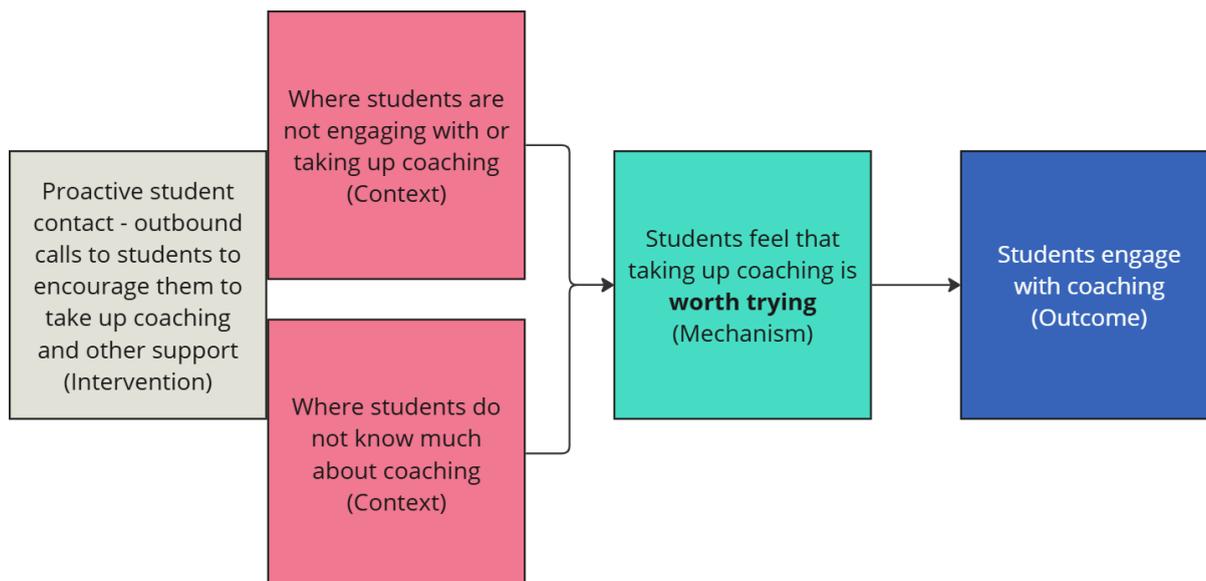
5.1.3 Cluster 1: Detailed findings

Key finding 1: Students often knew little about coaching before they started, but there is no evidence that prior knowledge made a difference to outcomes.

Several coaches were surprised by how little students seemed to know about how coaching worked. This may have made a difference to take-up, with 8 students choosing not to start coaching after initially signing up. However, coaches stated that students not knowing much about how coaching worked did not make a difference to how students responded once coaching got under way, or to outcomes.

Some implementation factors may have made a difference to how much students knew about coaching. While some students were individually contacted to invite them to sign up for coaching, others found out via mass email from their lecturers. This was not the intended approach. Each school was asked to identify and target students who would benefit, and although some did so and students received individual messages, others simply contacted all students from the 'global majority'. Students told us that they did not always fully engage with the detail of these emails and did not fully understand what was being offered.

Two introductory sessions were held before the start of coaching. While these sessions did go into detail about coaching, they were attended by fewer than 10 students across two sessions. This may also have contributed to some students knowing less about coaching than expected.

What students said about finding out about coaching

I found out from university. So they sent me a generalised e-mail saying 'Oh, there's coaching sessions if you'd like to join, feel free'. (Student B)

I didn't really know what to expect in the beginning. (Student M)

It was just when it said coaching. And then I think I've read something about assessments.

I think, them words kind of like popped out to me and I thought, Oh my God, they'll help me with my assessments. (Student E)

What coaches said about students getting started with coaching

I think sometimes they come and just say, Oh yeah, it seems a bit interesting. So I'm not sure. Yeah, but I'd try it or, you know, they weren't sure exactly.

Some turned up and said oh, I was told to come. I'm not sure what this is about. (Coach R)

I don't think they understood the process at all and I think that was one of the reasons why it took so long to even make the initial contact. I don't think they were fully aware of why I've been contacting them, and it almost felt that there was a bit of, well, I've been put through to this thing, and I don't know, and I'm not clear what it's for and how it would benefit me.

So I got the feeling that it wasn't on their list of importance, and that it's, you know, if I've got assignments to do before Christmas, I haven't got time to talk to you for an hour, you know. Because you're not important in terms of me having to work, or me having to bash out some assignments. I think they didn't see it as a helpful tool. I think they saw it as something as an extra, a luxury extra that they can't afford right now. (Coach J)

Key finding 2: Where there was already a personal relationship with the Associate Professor, students felt more encouraged to try out coaching.

A small number of students already had a personal relationship with the Associate Professor who was the key point of contact for the coaching programme. They had participated in her previous co-created modules or she was their dissertation supervisor. One student also knew of her by reputation. Those that knew her well and had direct contact from her showed more understanding of the coaching programme and were more positive about it at the start, although there is no evidence that this led to better outcomes by the end.

What students said about the Associate Professor's role

Syra contacted us on e-mail and I was interested like, oh sure, this will be a great thing to do. So I signed up and, yeah, I guess she was very encouraging about it. She was kind of promoting it in a way which got me to apply for it and [sign up for] coaching. I think I wanted to do the coaching programme, because the way she described it made it feel like it was really helpful, so I gave it a go. (Student F)

I trusted, you know, that it would be from a good source. Because she's... she's done a lot of work in, like, inclusion and equality. So I trusted that it was good. (Student J)

The Associate Professor noted that they followed up with several students, through different channels including MS Teams, phone calls and texts, before those students booked coaching sessions. However, students tended not to recall this, and said that once they had committed to coaching, they booked sessions directly with their coach. It is not clear to what extent the Associate Professor's follow-up (which sometimes amounted to several calls over several weeks) made a difference to student engagement with coaching.

Key finding 3: Engagement varied across students, with some students not starting and several not taking up the full quota of sessions

About a quarter of students recruited withdrew from coaching at the very start of the process, before taking up their first coaching session.

Table 4: number of students taking up coaching sessions

Recruitment round	No. of students recruited	No. of students withdrawn	No. of students taking up at least one coaching session
Round 1: Sept 2024	30	7	23
Round 2: Dec 2024	4	1	3

Take-up varied across the cohort, with 11 out of 26 students taking up four or fewer sessions, while seven students took up more than the initially allotted six sessions. This also varied by engagement risk stage. The table below shows take-up of coaching by engagement risk stage, for those students who consented to sharing their data (total 23 students).

Engagement stage	Number of students	Number of students taking up 4 or fewer sessions (out of 6)
0 (no risk)	11	4
1 (low risk, monitored by student liaison)	5	0
2 (medium risk, Programme Lead intervention)	7	5

Key finding 4: Most students engaged with coaching when they felt it was 'worth trying' rather than 'worthwhile'

Students tended not to be convinced that coaching would be 'worthwhile' before starting. It was more that they felt it was worth giving it a go to see what it was like, or because it couldn't hurt and might help. A small number of students were initially concerned it was a scam before they found out more.

Once students had completed their first session, or the first couple of sessions in some cases, they felt more comfortable and confident in coaching, and could see how it would help them.

There was no clear evidence that students with more contact with the Associate Professor felt more strongly that coaching was 'worth trying.' As we were unable to speak to students who did not take up coaching, it is also not clear why some students felt that coaching was worth trying and others did not. Some students who took up four or fewer sessions found it difficult to fit coaching into an already busy and overloaded schedule, and so this may also have been an issue for students who did not take up coaching, though the evidence for this is weak.

What students said about coaching being 'worth trying'

I've been getting some messages and they've been from scammers obviously and yeah. So I [was wondering] if this one of those or not and then I just [thought] ask for money, I'm not going to give it. (Student G)

I'll be honest, I didn't think it was gonna be anything special until I had my first meeting with the person I had it with. (Student N)

Just thought I'd give it a go. You know, I liked the idea of, I suppose, how the e-mail sounded. (Student RM)

Student researcher reflections on Cluster 1 – written by Okwuchi Osondu

REFLECTION ON CLUSTER 1

Through the various data collated, it was discovered that the outbound calls were not stimulating enough to motivate students to take up coaching. From most of the transcripts that I coded (both from the coaches and students), it was obvious that because students were either called or texted to take up coaching, some did not bother signing up for it, others signed up with a different perception of what coaching is (as exemplified in one of the student interviews where the student felt that she was going to get help with her assessment) which is very different from what they were told when the session started, while the rest only signed up to see what the coaching was all about.

Based on this discovery, I propose that we broaden the means of communication or passing information about coaching to the students through the following means:
1. Passing the information and highlighting the benefits of coaching during the school open day, which can earn the school positive points with prospective students. This way, when they eventually receive the call, they will know what they are signing up for.
2. Passing the information to students through their module teachers or mentors. From one of the transcripts I coded, a student stated that her supervisor/mentor informed her about the program and its benefits, which motivated her to sign up for it (though she initially refused to sign up after receiving the call/SMS).

We also discovered from the data that the first two sessions were used to explain what coaching is and what they will achieve at the end of their full sessions. This was boring to some of the students because it was like they were being lectured, and no student wants to receive lectures outside the classroom (because that is like adding more to their already filled plate). This could, in my opinion, be one of the reasons that most students dropped out of the coaching.

Highlighting on context, my question is this: Should the focus be only on students who are not previously engaged in coaching and other support services?

I ask this question because there was a student in one of the transcripts that I coded who was previously engaged in a support group, and that prior experience/engagement played a good role in helping him successfully finish his coaching sessions. Also, another student who already knew what the coaching was all about (whether through prior experience or prior information) before signing up wanted more sessions at the end of her assigned sessions.

There is no disputing the fact that students who take up coaching and diligently attend their full sessions have only good things to say about it.
Consequent on the above, I reiterate that my proposal for prior information on coaching to students before they sign up for it be adopted.

5.2 Cluster 2: Psychological safety in the coaching room

5.2.1 Cluster 2: Theory

This cluster aimed to test whether psychological safety in the coaching room affects the achievement of coaching goals, what aspects of the intervention support psychological safety and what contexts affect it.

Coaching is non-directive and non-judgmental (Intervention) → Where students have not previously had non-directive and non-judgmental support (Context) → Students feel safe to share openly with their coach (Mechanism) → Students achieve the coaching goals they have set for themselves (Outcome)
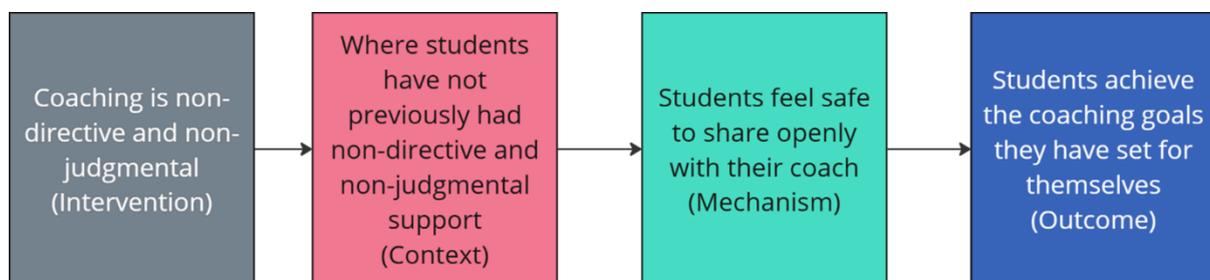
5.2.2 Cluster 2: Summary of findings

Our updated cluster diagram places more emphasis on trust, and on students feeling comfortable with their coach. It also includes more steps before students achieve their coaching goals. Students feeling comfortable with their coaches and able to speak openly does not directly lead to their achieving their coaching goals. Instead, it creates the conditions for them to develop insights (see Cluster 3 below) or gain new skills, which then supports them to achieve their goals.

Key findings

1. The strength of the coach/student relationship appears to be one of the most important enablers of self-awareness.
2. Building and maintaining the coach/student relationship requires a high level of skill on the part of the coaches.
3. Coaches take care to introduce the process well and set clear boundaries at the start.

Revised Cluster 2 diagram: building rapport to support insight
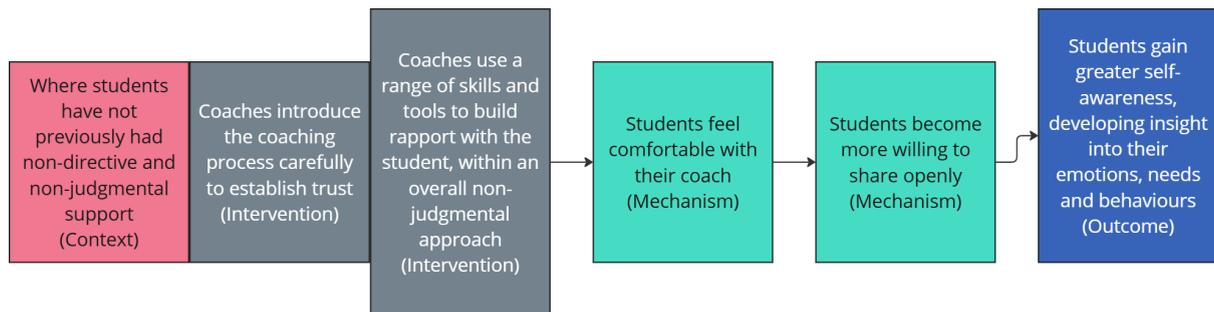
5.2.3 Cluster 2: detailed findings

Key finding 1: The strength of the relationship between coach and student appears to be one of the most important enablers of self-awareness.

Students often described a strong sense of rapport with their coach. Without exception, students felt that their coach understood them, had their best interests at heart and did not judge them. This relational dynamic stood out as different to other relationships in their lives, even when other relationships were also supportive.

The student/coach relationship was balanced between formal (structured through sessions) and informal. Students often described it as 'like talking to a friend' and emphasised how 'nice' they found their coaches. Students did not use the words 'safe' or 'safety' to describe the relationship, but did use the word 'comfortable' – and the revised cluster diagram reflects this.

This rapport contributed to the emotional conditions for trust and reflection, as students felt able to speak openly without feeling criticised or corrected. The strength of the relationship appears to be one of the most important enablers of insight. There is strong and direct evidence that the strength of the relationship mattered to students - it was mentioned by almost all students, and they spoke about how important it was to them. Students tended to be less clear about how this supported insight or self-awareness - this tended to be implicit rather than explicit.

What students tell us about rapport with their coach

She was very understanding of what I had going on, as if she's also been through the same. (Student L)

I just trusted her from the start" (Student K)

You'd likely to make more progress when someone takes an interest and is nice to you (Student F).

"He [coach] knew where I was coming from. He said that even he was shy (Student G)

"It's a non-judgmental zone" (Student A)

> *Comfortability [between student and coach] is the biggest thing. If someone's not telling you the full cake, you can't advise them on how to cut it. (Student N)*

Key finding 2: Building and maintaining the coach/student relationship requires a high level of skill on the part of the coaches

Students and coaches highlighted a range of skills and tools used by coaches. Students described coaches listening to them actively, translating their confused thoughts into coherent feedback, and making links between things they had said over multiple sessions. Students also described the use of a range of tools including prompt cards, template plans and timetables.

Coaches described the fine-grained distinctions between coaching and mentoring, and how they judiciously move from one to the other and are transparent about doing so. They also described how and when they decide to self-disclose to support student trust and rapport, and how they ensure that this is in the service of the student. Coaches are often highly attuned to the people they coach, subtly adapting body language and speech register to build rapport.

Coaches reported differing levels of self-disclosure (i.e. sharing information about their own lives and experience) as part of their practice. Some students recalled their coaches sharing where they went on holiday or which hairdressers they used which helped the process feel more human and contributed to a sense that the coach was genuinely interested in them. Not all coaches report that this self-disclosure is something that they do routinely but students appear to value it when it does occur. Some students also valued hearing about the coach's qualifications, as this helped to build trust that the coach knew what they were doing.

What students said about their coach's skills

If we're speaking about something that's off topic, should that kind of bring it back without making it seem like she's interrupting what I'm speaking about so she'll like, she'll ask the question, but like, bring it in quite smoothly. (Student F)

She listened to my, like, ridiculous ramblings and was able to make sense of it. And then like, broke it down for me 'cause I found it hard to explain. (Student B)

She was very [good at] letting me take the lead and it made me comfortable to see her giving me suggestions. Actually, she wouldn't give me suggestions. She would give me an idea and she would ask me questions to understand myself better, and that helped me to decide how to navigate situations without directly being directed towards making a choice. It was more I give you ideas and then you see where to go and what to do. (Student M)

Key finding 3: Coaches take care to introduce the process well

Coaches played an active role in creating the conditions for psychological safety by taking care to clearly introduce the coaching process in the first session. This included clarifying boundaries around confidentiality. Coaches reflected that students were reassured about the confidentiality of the service and the independence from university staff. Coaches told us that this acted as a mechanism to build trust, with students more able to engage honestly and explore new or tricky issues.

Students did not recall this as clearly, though a few did mention confidentiality, and that they were reassured that their coach would not disclose what they shared. Some also mentioned

that coaches took care to emphasise that students could use the sessions to talk about whatever they wished to.

What coaches tell us about setting up the process with safety:

When we introduce ourselves in the first session, I always explain why I got into coaching and why my particular niche is around working with young adult and children (coach S).

My first meet [with a student] would always be an introduction to read through the contract. I'll say a little bit about me, how and why I got into coaching. And then I asked them to open up about them, and then we'll talk through the process of the coaching in terms of we're here to work with you, they are your [student] sessions, you own it. (coach U)

But in terms of the safety, I think it's because we've got a clear script, so that helps set the contract. (coach S)

Most have seemed to have felt pretty safe pretty quick (coach S).

5.3 Cluster 3: Developing self-awareness in the coaching room

5.3.1 Cluster 3: Theory

This cluster theory suggests that increased self-awareness contributes to students being more likely to achieve the coaching goals that they set for themselves.
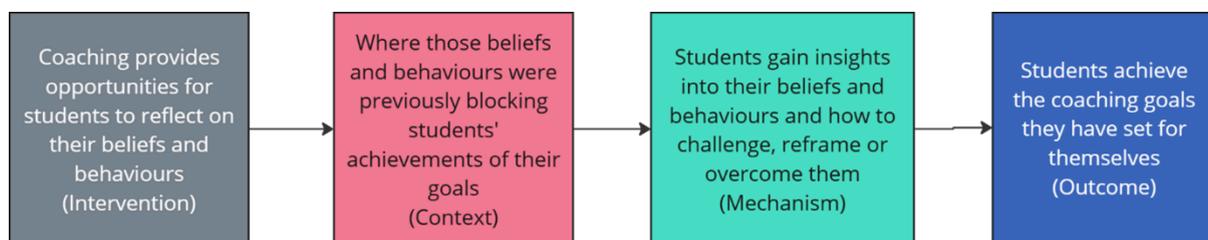
5.3.2 Cluster 3: Summary of findings

Our original theory was that coaching provides opportunities for students to reflect on their beliefs and behaviours, leading them to gain insights and to challenge, reframe or overcome limiting beliefs. We found that although coaching supported some students to develop self-awareness or insight into their own beliefs, this was not the case for all students. For others, the focus was more on skill development or shifts in behaviour, which may or may not be connected to limiting beliefs. What we thought was a single pathway about developing self-awareness turned out to be better described as three separate but interconnected pathways, not all of which directly relate to self-awareness.

While Cluster 3a in our revised diagram still refers to students exploring and reframing limiting beliefs, clusters 3b and 3c are more focused on behaviours. Cluster 3b focuses on goal-setting

and tracking and cluster 3c focuses on skill development. All three pathways depend on coaches and students already having developed rapport, as described in Cluster 2 above.

Key findings

1. The process of setting and tracking goals helps students stay focused and motivated.
2. Coaching supports students to develop helpful skills and habits in study and life.
3. Coaching enables students to surface limiting beliefs, where students feel comfortable to do so.
4. Coaches support students to positively reframe limiting beliefs, while providing appropriate challenge where necessary.

Revised Cluster 3 diagrams:

Cluster 3a: reflecting on limiting beliefs
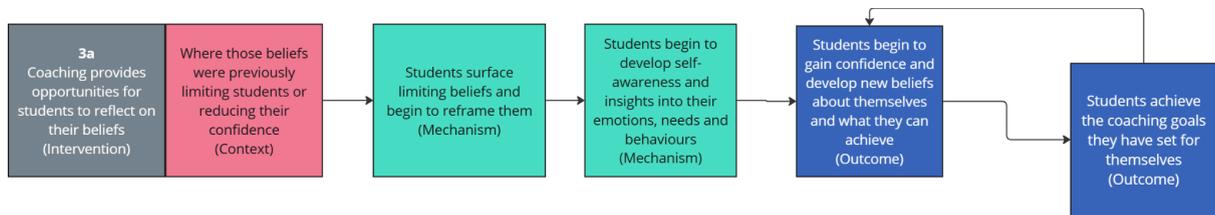
Cluster 3b: setting and tracking goals
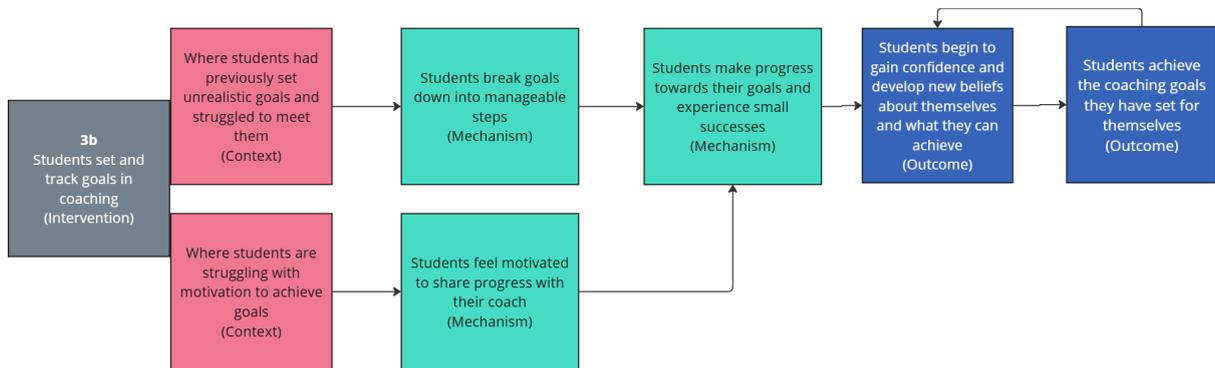
Cluster 3c: building helpful skills and habits
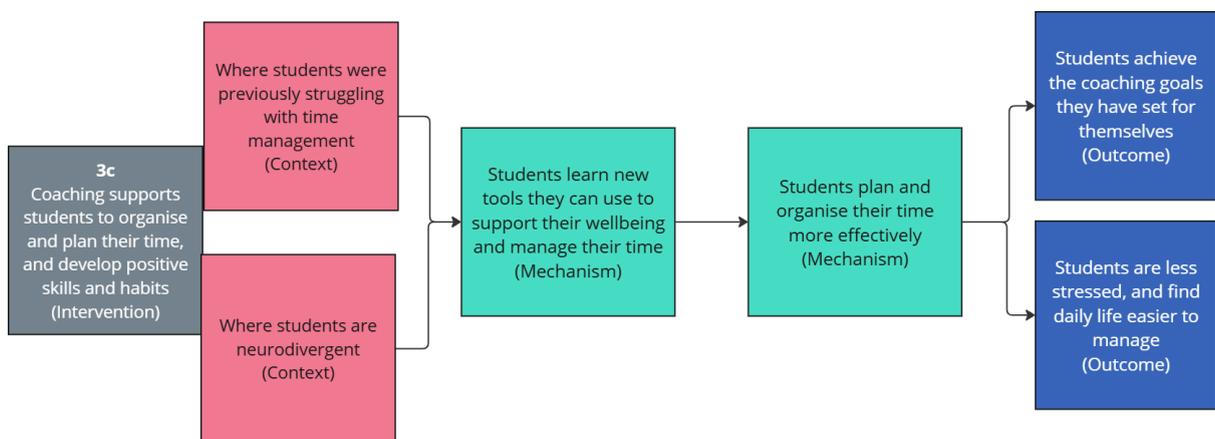
5.3.3 Cluster 3: Detailed findings

Key finding 1: The process of setting and tracking goals helps students to stay focused and motivated

When students begin coaching, they set up to three goals for themselves, and they check in on these goals at the end. In addition, coaches often support students to identify tasks to work on between sessions that lead to their goals and discuss these tasks and the start of the next session. Students found this helpful, particularly tracking smaller goals between tasks – it was the 'intervention factor' most frequently mentioned positively by students.

Setting and tracking goals seems to have worked for students in two ways. For some, it was the process of breaking down larger goals into more manageable sub-goals that was particularly effective. Where students had previously struggled with goal-setting or had set unrealistic goals, breaking them down into manageable steps made them feel doable.

For others, it was the motivation and accountability provided by tracking goals with someone caring and supportive. Within this, some students talked about not wanting to let their coach down or disappoint them, while others talked about the positive motivation of having something to celebrate with their coach. Still others found that talking about their goals put them back in touch with their intrinsic motivation for being at university.

What students said about breaking down goals into manageable steps

Your goals: in a way you can split them into categories and see like, OK, this is what I need to work on, that's what I need to work on. I think you just kind of need someone to tell you and then you have to work on it yourself. (Student F)

I think one of the steps is having immediate goals. It made me see my goals as more possible to achieve. You sometimes think 'Oh my gosh, I have to do so much things to get to that goal,' but when you sit there and think about it [it's more manageable]. (Student D)

I'm someone who's constantly, my whole life, set myself unrealistic goals, and never make them, so I feel bad about myself. You always think 'why am I setting goals I'm never gonna make them.' But when you're sat with someone who's a professional at this and they're walking you through it and saying 'maybe this is better, maybe this is more realistic' you feel like you're actually doing something to make progress.' (Student C)

What students said about accountability and motivation

At the end of every [session] we selected what we're going to do next week. So what am I going to do to meet that goal? So if I had two assignments, it would be maybe like planning the first one, and then on the next week she'd check in to see how much I'd done, which I found quite helpful. (Student I)

When she's checking in, it felt like someone's depending on me and they're going to come back on me and check – it's literally like at school they check your homework. So I know I need to get it done because I know she'll be waiting. I wouldn't want her to say 'you've not done your homework that you've had all this time to do it.' I wouldn't want to disappoint her. (Student E)

It's just that I wanted to have an improvement. I wanted to be able to [get organised], because I knew that it would benefit me if it works. It would benefit me more than anyone else really, so I

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really wanted things to change and improve, and I feel like things were able to change and improve (Student J).

Key finding 2: Coaching supports students to develop helpful skills and habits in study and life

Most students emphasised developing better skills, habits and routines to cope with study and life, over and above gaining insights into themselves and their beliefs. These were often related to time management and organisation.

Students who disclosed that they were neurodivergent found this particularly helpful, especially in developing and sticking to daily routines and preparing to attend classes.

As well as supporting degree engagement (see Cluster 5), improvements to habits and routines also supported students to achieve other coaching goals in their personal lives, including returning to hobbies, exercise routines or religious practice. For a few students, this also led to reduced stress, improved sleep or feeling more positive.

While coaches often made suggestions about what to do, this was still done without being prescriptive. Coaches tended to offer options which students would try out, and if they did not work then the student and coach would work through alternative possibilities together.

What students said about developing skills and habits

[it's been] a massive improvement from zero. I'm not, like, perfect every day, but I do try. In the first session she gave me some guidance, like pack your bag the day before you go out. Sort out your outfits a couple of days before so you're not rushing around on the day making sure they're all ironed. That really did speed things up in the morning so I didn't have to stress about those things. It sounds really little and it doesn't sound important, but I really struggle with time management. So many times I'd get stressed so much about finding things to wear or getting ready that I just wouldn't end up leaving the house. (Student J)

So we kind of just talked on little steps, getting enough sleep, setting an alarm. There's little things that help you make you know the day better. I think over time I did improve. With my sleep routine, it is a bit messed up even now but I did try to make little changes like not eating too late. (Student F)

You feel more organised when you tell someone else what you're planning and they say it back to you, and then say what they think might be better (Student O)

She [coach] like, made like a daily reminder for me. [for example] in the morning like around 6:00 or 7:00 she made a reminder that's like oh, this is the time you want to go to the gym. [and another reminder for] this is the time you want your lunch. So I'm back on with my eating and stuff. Yeah. She did, like, a reminder list. (Student A)

I mean, yeah, besides organisation.
I think she really helped me, like mentally prepare for each thing like, you know, being aware and before starting each task to, you know, have some clear state of mind. And so that I could approach each task with clarity and enough strength. (Student L)

Key finding 3: Coaching enables students to surface limiting beliefs, where students feel comfortable to do so

Students often began coaching with limiting beliefs that undermined their confidence. They rarely disclosed these to us, but did talk about wanting to become more confident, or strengthening or rebuilding relationships with people around them. Coaches gave more details about students' limiting beliefs, often using the term 'impostor syndrome' to describe them. Coaches described some students questioning why they had come to university or whether they were good enough to complete their studies.

Some students did talk about being hard on themselves, especially in relation to module results not being as high as they would have hoped. However, they tended to focus more on skills and habits than on beliefs or self-perceptions. Therefore, the evidence for coaching supporting students to surface and respond to limited beliefs is perhaps slightly weaker than for other clusters, where students talked about their experiences in more detail.

What coaches told us about limiting beliefs and confidence

Because of all the issues that were going on [...] well, I don't fit in [...] Belong. Can I really do this? Is it what I really want to do? (coach R describing imposter syndrome)

Why am I here? Why did I choose to go to Uni? (coach R describing student questioning aspirations)

[In a coaching session we explored] how do you feel that when you get up on the morning, you're ready for that lesson? What goes through your mind? And she was speaking about her family life, what she's got to get before she's even started the day and all the anxieties before she even gets to university. So we spoke about that, you know, in terms of managing other things that conflict with the university experience. (Coach U)

The coaching space gave students opportunities to articulate beliefs and patterns that they might not otherwise have noticed. Coaches described teasing out what students brought to the sessions and asking questions to reveal underlying, and often negative, assumptions. Students also talked about moments when coaches supported them to reframe a belief or pattern. For example, one student had wanted to improve their communication skills. Through coaching, the student realised that they had the advantage of speaking four languages fluently and making themselves understood in each. They began to realise that the issue was more one of confidence than skill.

What students and coaches told us about how it felt to acknowledge limiting beliefs

You have to acknowledge what you're feeling in order to fix it (Student F)

You don't really like what they're [coach] saying. You start to notice there's a bit of truth to it. That's when, you know, ok, yeah. I need this. I don't want it but I needed it. (N student male level 5)

That's when they start to reveal more and more...and then they're keen to tell you what's happened for them. (coach R)

Some students told us that they were learning to be kinder to themselves, and learning to take a broader perspective. For example, one student told us that the coach had asked them what they would say if a friend came to them with the same issue, and that opened up the space for the student to find a kinder approach to their predicament.

In some cases, this loosening of self-doubt was reflected in students experimenting with new behaviours, such as rewarding new wins, practising speaking up in class and making time for hobbies and time spent with friends.

What students told us about changes to their beliefs

I guess, yes [coaching made a difference to how I feel about myself]. In terms of me being able to be more kind at times to myself and acknowledging that I am doing the best that I can in the time being and I should not pressure myself (Student M)

"Don't be afraid to ask questions because there's no right or wrong answers. So then I started doing it a little bit" (Student G)

"Every little thing I do [achieve], I like to treat myself" (Student O)

Key finding 4: Coaches support students to positively reframe limiting beliefs, while providing appropriate challenge where necessary

Students spoke about coaches reflecting back their strengths and achievements. When this happened, it boosted students' confidence and supported them to build on positive habits. Students found this particularly helpful when they were struggling with perceived failure or long-standing issues with confidence around a specific issue.

Some coaches talked about intentionally reflecting back and reframing strengths as part of their practice. One coach described a student initially saying that they lacked experience of certain skills that they needed for an internship. As the conversation went on, the coach asked the student to describe some of the experience they had. The coach was then able to reflect back that this experience did match the skills that the student thought were lacking. The coach described this as a '*light-bulb*' moment for the student, who then went on to apply for the internship.

What students said about coaches identifying and reframing their strengths or positive experiences

I was looking at the fact that I've got 2:1s for the other two [assignment] and not the first, but she [the coach] made me realise that it's not like [I] haven't got any firsts. You've still like, you've still tried and you still got to like, even though you didn't get [a first in] all four [assignments] (Student O)

She [coach] would bring out all the features which boosted my confidence quite a lot. And I never really had that with anyone else (Student A)

Most students particularly valued the reassurance and strengths-focused approach described above. For some, there was value in being challenged with weaknesses being acknowledged. One student explained *'You don't really like what they're saying...you start to notice that there's a bit of truth to it […] Ok. Yeah. I needed this. I don't want it, but I needed it.' (Student N)* This

suggests that for some, discomfort might be part of the mechanism by which some students gain insight into their limiting beliefs. At this time it is unclear how widespread this experience is and the extent to which variation in coaching style and coach–student rapport enables this.

5.4 Cluster 4: Psychological safety outside the coaching room

5.4.1 Cluster 4 theory

This cluster tests whether psychological safety – or the lack of it – in a student's experience of their degree programme or wider university life affects whether they can translate the progress that they make in coaching into meaningful engagement in their degree programme. Because the original cluster focused on student actions outside and after coaching, no intervention factors were included in the original cluster.

| Where students' degree programme is also a psychologically safe environment for them (Context) | → | Students feel safe to engage authentically with the material, their professors and their peers on their degree programme (Mechanism) | → | Students engage more with their degree programme (Outcome) |

5.4.2 Cluster 4: summary of findings

1. While students noted that their relationships with tutors tended to be distant, they did not usually connect this to their struggles with attendance or assignment completion.
2. Coaches supported students to ask for help from tutors or from the Learning Hub, often for the first time, and students who did so found it useful.

While our original formulation of psychological safety within the context of the degree programme was not supported by the evidence, we did find some evidence that students building relationships with their tutors and feeling able to ask for help supported them to engage more with their degree programme, so the revised cluster focuses on this.

| Coaches support students to reframe relationships with their lecturers and seek help if needed (Intervention) | → | Students have a better understanding of how lecturers can support them (Mechanism) | → | Students approach lecturers and/or Learning Hub for support (Mechanism) | → | Where lecturers are responsive and provide support (Context) | → | Students engage more with their degree programme (Outcome) |

5.4.3 Cluster 4: detailed findings

While students noted that their relationships with tutors tended to be distant, they did not connect this to their struggles with attendance or assignment completion.

Most of the students that we talked to had at least some challenges with attending lectures or completing assignments. They generally attributed their struggles with attendance or managing assignments to other factors outside the university, which will be discussed in Cluster 5, or to their own challenges with organisation and time management, as discussed in Cluster 3 above. Some students did note that their relationships with tutors tended to be distant, but did not usually connect this to their struggles with attendance or assignment completion. Those students who had engaged with Student Support also noted that they found it difficult to build an ongoing rapport with Student Support staff.

Both students and coaches noted that students struggled with attending lectures in person, though, again, this was not attributed to a lack of psychological safety. The students who struggled most with day-to-day organisation were often also those who struggled most with attendance – and this was often due to ADHD or other neurodivergent conditions. As they developed more effective routines, they often saw their attendance increase.

We therefore found weak evidence that psychological safety within students' degree programme had any link with student engagement.

What students told us about attending lectures

In the morning, I had less things to worry about. I wasn't running around the house like a headless chicken. Everything was planned out. I knew where everything was. I didn't have to worry about what I was gonna wear, 'cause I did that the night before. Yeah, I just made my life a heck of a lot easier, obviously. (Student B)

Thinking about the benefits of attending class and what I can gain from them, that really helped me to actually attend (Student J)

Because when I'm down in my head, I'm like, I really could have done this at home. (Student B)

What students told us about their relationships with lecturers and Student support

Compare [coaching] to Student Support where you're speaking to Jack one day, next day's Daisy, day after that is Sam. There's different people that you're speaking to that you can't build no rapport with nobody. (Student N)

But it was good to actually be on campus 'cause. I have not seen these lecturers before. They were like, oh, who are you? I'm like, oh, I've been here for a year. (Student B)

The lecturers don't know your name, you just go to classes and then you leave (Student D)

Coaches supported students to ask for help from tutors or from the Learning Hub, often for the first time, and students who did so found it useful.

Several students mentioned asking tutors or lecturers for help for the first time, following coaching. This was often related to asking for extensions or mitigating circumstances, but students also asked more general questions about the material or asked for feedback on assignments.

While students did not say this explicitly, several implied that they had previously believed that their tutors either could not or would not provide personalised support. It was often only when the coach said that the tutors were there to help them, and that was their job, that students took this on board and began to make contact. Those students that discussed their relationships with their tutors were often not conscious that they had limiting beliefs about their tutors until the coaches pointed it out to them.

> **What students said about contacting their tutors**
>
> *Because of the coaching session, I actually established a relationship with my personal tutor... because before I wasn't really in contact with her. Even then, I thought to myself a little bit... like, what are they going to do to help me? Like there's nothing really they can do or that they're probably just going to tell me to look on the brief, but then the professors are there, they get paid to help you, you pay to go to uni. (Student D)*
>
> *It did help to be fair, because once I spoke about it, I emailed someone at uni, the librarian, and then she sent me over some videos about the referencing. I could have gone in face to face to face and done it, but obviously I lived quite a way away. So she just sent me some, like, useful tools. But it was through the coaching that helped me think about getting that help, if you know what I mean. (Student O)*

Students generally preferred to go to their tutors with questions or get feedback from them rather than use the Learning Hub. However, one student did use the Learning Hub to get feedback on drafts, again prompted by conversations with their coach.

Students found that asking for help supported them either to get the adjustments they needed (for example extensions due to mitigating circumstances, or references to take on roles within the university) or to improve their work based on feedback.

5.5 Cluster 5: Having the resources to engage

5.5.1 Cluster 5 theory

This cluster tests whether students with fewer resources in terms of time, money and headspace find it more difficult to engage with their degree programme even if they have had positive experiences of coaching.

Where students have the financial security, stability in their personal lives, time and headspace to engage well (Context)	→	Students feel resourced to spend time and effort on their degree programme (Mechanism)	→	Students engage more with their degree programme
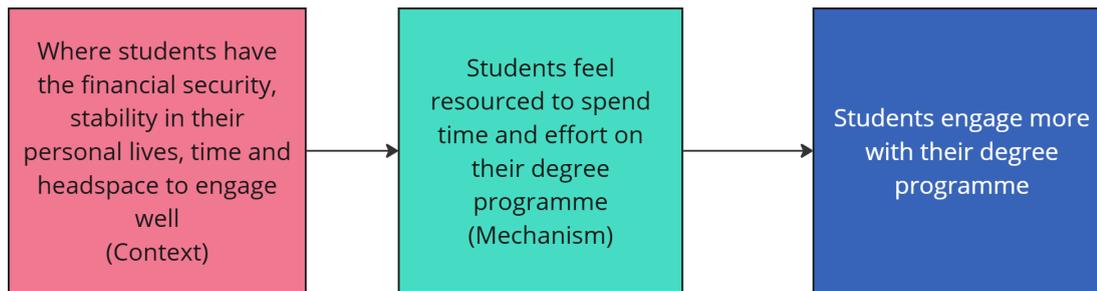
5.5.2 Cluster 5: summary of findings

1. Coaching did support students to engage more with their degree programme, although this looked different for different students.
2. Many students were dealing with complex life, work and family circumstances that did impact how they engaged with their degree programme.
3. Coaching supported students with some challenges, but other challenges led students to step back from coaching.
4. Many students had other sources of support both internal and external to the university and found coaching useful alongside these.

The findings confirmed our overall theory, that students who had the stability and headspace to engage did so, both with the coaching itself and with their degree programme. When students' circumstances were less stable, they did not feel resourced to engage either with coaching or with their degree programme.

Key finding 1: Coaching did support improvements in degree engagement, although these looked different for different students.

Coaching often supported students to make practical, tangible changes that enabled them to engage more with their degree programme. These included: planning and organisation, attending more lectures, submitting assignments earlier, putting in more effort and asking for help.

Students talked about learning to plan their time better and handle multiple assignments alongside the demands of life and work (see Cluster 3 above). They found that this made the process of doing assignments less stressful. For students who were already meeting deadlines, this enabled them to hand in ahead of time or to submit drafts for feedback. For those who had previously struggled to meet deadlines, they found it easier to do so, although some still had non-submissions during the academic year. Students did not mention non-submissions in interviews, so it was helpful to have the attainment data to triangulate what they said with their actual rate of submission. Overall, students were submitting more assignments on time, including those that had previously struggled with this.

Students also talked about putting more effort into their assignments, procrastinating less, and asking for help and feedback from tutors (see cluster 4 above). These are all potential indicators of increased degree engagement. These were not always reflected in formal datasets. Of the 23 students for whom we have data, 18 remained on the same engagement stage or moved up and down through engagement stages but did not clearly improve. Of these, 10 were at stage zero, so would not have room to 'improve' as such. Three of the remaining students improved in terms of engagement, and two worsened.

It would have been helpful to have had cleaner and more usable management information data to support our understanding of student engagement, especially attendance at lectures, and the extent to which coaching supported student engagement in their degree programme.

Learning to plan their time better was not always a straightforward process, and some students found it difficult to sustain good habits once the coaching finished. Others took longer to establish them but then saw steady continued improvement.

What students said about planning and organising their time

Most of the time I used to have my coaching sessions and then go for like a little walk, and then come back and then [start working]. So whilst I was on my walk, I used to plan out like: I'm going to do this much of this assignment or I'm going to do like this much of my professional placement or something - I'd just basically plan it out and then I'd by the time I'd come back, I'd just do my assignment or whatever I plan to do that day, and then I'd be free for the end of the day. (Student O)

I actually got a really good grade [for one assignment] and it was because I started it way before the deadline, and I didn't do an all nighter the night before, and I wasn't stressed on the day. So I just had to update my references on the morning [of the deadline] and then I gave it in and actually got the grade I wanted. (check student)

The first [assignment] ended up happening last minute again and then the second it kind of did improve and then more towards the end it improved a bit, but obviously it was a slow process (Student E)

Key finding 2: Many students were dealing with complex life, work and family circumstances that did impact how they engaged with their degree programme.

Students disclosed a wide range of complex circumstances during their interview, and there may be more going on that they did not disclose. Students talked about bereavement, single parenthood, physical and mental health challenges and neurodiversity. Coaches also mentioned students' circumstances. Most coaches compared students from LTU to students they had coached from other universities, and in their experience LTU students seemed to have more complex challenges in their lives than those from Russell Group universities who had previously been coached by the same coaches.

What coaches said about students' circumstances

Yeah, sometimes there was family issues, you know, that was going on. Sometimes they were working, you know, because a lot of them had to work to sustain themselves while they were at uni.

So yeah, it was just mental health sometimes as well. (Coach R)

A lot of the Leeds Trinity students seem to have a lot of complex circumstances around them, from family to health issues particularly [compared to students from Russell Group universities] (Coach W)

Students tended to normalise some of their circumstances, such as working long hours. They did not see this as particularly unusual or salient, so tended to mention it casually rather than see it as a challenge they were navigating. By contrast, coaches were well aware that the hours

worked by students in this cohort were unusual compared to other groups of students they had coached.

> **What coaches said about students working alongside studying**
>
> *I hadn't realised how much is going on for them – some of the students are working a lot of hours. Past students who we have worked [from other universities] with haven't had to work as many hours. I know most university students do have a part time job or do work a few hours a week, maybe 12 hours at a push a week, Some of the students are working double that or almost full time. (Coach S)*

Some students did acknowledge that work had an impact on their engagement in their degree programme. Work took up time, headspace and energy that they would otherwise have used in studying.

> **What students said about managing work and studying**
>
> *Well, you're working, and it takes up a lot of energy. A lot of hours of the day goes towards the job you're doing. By the time you're back home and you want to study, your brain's already so tired mentally. (Student N)*
>
> *Yeah, I know. Like, I know that it is the work that's impacting it, but I can't just not work. I do agency work so it's kind of last minute. Like they ring me in the morning and tell me 'you've got work, do you want to go.' Obviously I do like the job [and want to work in a similar role in the longer term] (Student E)*

Some students also mentioned the impact of commuting to university and the difficulty of attending lectures when commuting large distances by public transport.

Key finding 3: Coaching was supportive for some challenges, but other challenges led students to step back from coaching.

Some students said that coaching helped them to manage the complexities of life. This was particularly true when the challenges they experienced were to do with relationships whether with family or friends. In these contexts, coaching tended to help them to gain perspective, set different boundaries or reconnect with people that they had lost touch with.

In other situations, particularly bereavement, illness or serious family situations, students tended to step back from coaching. If this happened towards the end of coaching, students tended not to go back for their final session. In these situations, students did not have the stability in their lives to be able to engage either with coaching or with their degree programme. This was often reflected in changes in their formal engagement status at these times. Triangulating what students said in their interviews with month-by-month changes to their formal engagement status helps to strengthen the evidence that some students disengaged with both coaching and their degree programme simultaneously when faced with particularly difficult life circumstances.

> **What students said about stepping back from coaching when facing serious family situations**
>
> *Yeah. So since then, I still had one session left with [coach], but I didn't really like… I've been… obviously I wasn't in the right head space 'cause. I was juggling that home life with my university life. So I'd like I kind of like blocked everyone out. (Student G)*

> **What students said about coaches supporting them with wider issues**
>
> *My mental health wasn't really doing amazing at the time. So that affected me, because there have been some problems with my health and with my family dynamics. So there was an additional thing that was weighing on me. They made it even harder for me to see objectively university and a load of assignments and attending lectures.*
>
> *But what we did [in coaching] was seeing the root of the issue that was affecting me and hurting me, and then she [coach] will give me the tools for me to assess what I was like to do, like taking actions on how to make the situation better for myself. And then resolving the issues, it would also influence positively my academic and my mental health (Student M)*

Key finding 4: Many students did have other sources of support, and found coaching useful alongside these.

Several students mentioned family and friends as sources of support as well as coaching, or were in supportive relationships with a partner. Some students were in family situations where some daily tasks, like cooking meals, were shared or done by other family members. Students acknowledged that this helped them to be able to concentrate more on their studies.

Some students were also receiving more formal support for mental health challenges, primarily counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Students found this helpful alongside coaching, and often found that different forms of support went well together. Counselling or CBT worked with mental health challenges in more depth, while coaching supported academic progress and building good habits.

> **What students and coaches said about other support alongside coaching**
>
> *Actually I found it very different. Because in counselling it would more entail you talking about your feelings and finding ways to overcome it over time. With coaching it was more being given some tools and from those tools you would be having to find your own answers and your own ways to resolve the issues. (Student M)*
>
> *They [students] want you to sort of counsel [them]. There was a couple where the coaching was good for them but they needed something else as well, and were referred to the university services (Coach S)*
>
> *I've got a lot of support from other services as well, so I don't know if it's a combination of them all, rather than just that [coaching] itself. (Student I)*

6. Discussion

In this section we outline how the findings have confirmed, refined or refuted aspects of the theory of change, and assess the strengths of the evidence. This is followed by a discussion of ideas for further exploration - both research and action. Finally, we set out the caveats and limitations of this research.

6.1 Theory of change

6.1.1 What we are learning about outcomes achieved:

Our initial theory of change hypothesised the following outcomes:

- Students engage with coaching and/or other support available.
- Students achieve the coaching goals they have set for themselves.
- Students engage more with their degree programme.
- Students have improved attainment in their degree.

Following our evaluation, we have identified the following outcomes:

- Students engage with coaching and/or other support available.
- Students achieve the coaching goals they have set for themselves.
- Students gain greater self-awareness, gaining greater insight into their emotions, needs and behaviours.
- Students begin to gain confidence and develop new beliefs about themselves and what they can achieve.
- Students are less stressed and find daily life easier to manage.
- Students engage more with their degree programme.

The evaluation has strengthened the theory of change by showing that the pathway to academic engagement is less direct than originally assumed. Emotional outcomes are more significant than we initially predicted in our first theory of change.

The insights that have surfaced include:

- The initial theory of change under-estimated the role of emotional outcomes. Initially, the coaching programme was assumed to help students 'stick with' their studies and perform better. Our evaluation suggests that shifts in self-awareness, confidence and stress management are more significant for students. These intermediate outcomes may be what makes engagement with studies sustainable in the longer-term.
- Confidence is developmental and a gradual shift. Students describe beginning to gain confidence and 'test out' new beliefs about themselves. The trajectory is about movement towards confidence (rather than an 'endpoint').
- For some, the pathway towards attainment is indirect i.e. managing stress, feeling confident and increased self-awareness.

Attainment remains an open question that isn't yet strongly evidenced. It may emerge over a longer timeframe or it may be that there are too many external factors for coaching alone to shift. Not all students have full results at the final reporting stage, particularly those that have deferred assessments or may be graduating in December. Of the seven for whom results are known, six have improved results from last year, with improvements of between seven and 13

percentage points. However, average marks at LTU improve year on year and we do not know whether these students have improved more or less than would have been expected.

6.1.2 How far the results support the CMO clusters

Broadly, the results of the evaluation support the original theory of change, with amendments and refinements to specific clusters as described in the findings, in Section 5.

We considered evidence to be stronger when:

- students articulated a causal link explicitly, rather than implying it or responding to prompting
- students' and coaches' views about a causal link were similar or had clear overlap
- all or most students with a particular set of circumstances said the same or similar things.

6.1.2.1 Evidence for clusters

Evidence for Clusters 2 and 3 is strongest, with strong overlap between student and coach views of what supports students to move towards their coaching goals. That said, cluster 3 required the most significant amendments to clarify and articulate the separate but interconnected causal pathways that support students to achieve their coaching goals.

Evidence for the original Cluster 4 is weakest, with little evidence to support that psychological safety within students' degree programme is salient. There was, however, limited evidence to support a causal link between students changing their understanding of their tutors' role, contacting them to seek support, and engaging in their degree programme, as articulated in the revised Cluster 4 diagram. Better quality management information data would have helped us to better understand the link between coaching and lecture attendance as one possible indicator of degree engagement.

6.1.2.2 Evidence for contexts

It was difficult to ascertain which contextual factors made a difference to mechanisms and outcomes for students. Student contexts are so individual and varied that few conclusions could be drawn about what works, or does not, in specific contexts. There was no clear evidence that gender or level of study made a difference to either mechanisms or outcomes. The same mechanisms and outcomes were articulated by both male and female students, and by both level 5 and level 6 students.

Interviews gave students the opportunity to self-disclose about their work, economic or personal circumstances but did not ask, for example, about the number of hours worked or whether students were in financially precarious situations. The evidence we did collect supports our initial view that at least some stability in terms of personal and financial circumstances was necessary for students to engage with their degree programme (Cluster 5). It also refined our understanding of Cluster 5, as students told us that when their circumstances became unstable, they disengaged with both coaching and their degree programme. We do not know whether any other types of support might have helped students in these circumstances.

One contextual factor that does seem to have played a key role is neurodiversity. Although many students benefitted from support with planning, organisation and breaking goals and tasks down into manageable steps, students who had disclosed that they were neurodivergent found these particularly helpful. They also spoke more explicitly and in greater depth about the positive effect that improving their planning and organisation had on their stress, sleep and health.

6.1.2.3 Evidence for mechanisms

The evidence to support the mechanisms was more robust than for the contextual factors, although some mechanisms were refined and made more specific. Students often explicitly identified key mechanisms in interviews, which were then also supported by the coaches' reflections. We had recognised the crucial importance of trust and rapport between student and coach in our theory, and this was further emphasised across all the interviews. This mechanism underpinned a range of outcomes including developing self-awareness, gaining confidence and achieving coaching goals.

6.2 Areas for further exploration

6.2.1 Whether it matters that coaches are from the 'global majority' if students are from the 'global majority'.

We found mixed views on this, from both coaches and students. Some students found it supportive that their coach was also from the 'global majority', even when this was not discussed with the coach. They felt that there were things they did not have to explain, or felt more deeply understood. They also saw their coaches as potential role models, who showed that it was possible to achieve in professional life as a person from the 'global majority'. Other students, by contrast, stated that their coach's background didn't matter to them so long as they had built trust and rapport and felt confident in their coach's skill to support them.

Coaches noted that in previous coaching programmes students had requested either male or female coaches, but not coaches that were from the 'global majority'. When asked, coaches also suggested that their racial identity may have mattered to some students but not others.

> **What students said about whether it mattered that the coach was from the 'global majority'**
>
> *I think it really helps that my coach was a person of colour because I feel like if it wasn't a person of colour, I don't think I would have had that same level of support. Not that another person wouldn't have helped me. It's just that they have more empathy and, like, higher level of understanding of, like, what we go through as people of colour (Student J)*
>
> *Realistically, it doesn't matter to me: if you're good at your job, then you are good at your job. That's just the way you are. So I like to think that she was just really good at her job. She knew how to listen properly" (Student B)*

6.2.2 Student belonging at university

A small number of students noted that their relationships with their personal tutors tended to be very distant and that contact was infrequent. No students named their personal tutors as

sources of support. Several had not previously asked tutors (personal tutors or module tutors) for help, and said that they would not have done so without intervention from their coach.

This contrasted with how students talked about their coaches, who took a personal interest in them as a whole person. Student/coach relationships were characterised by warmth, lack of judgement or power dynamics, and a shared understanding that personal concerns and successes mattered as much as academic ones.

This does not constitute direct evidence of a gap in belonging or a relational gap, but it does suggest that some students would benefit from closer, more relational contact with a trusted person who has their best interests at heart.

We explored this with the LTU team in the recommendations meeting. They noted that although they are a smaller university and can offer a more relational approach, this is not always experienced as such by students and some 'fall through the cracks.' (LTU team member) There was concern about some students who were 'disengaged, but not enough to warrant an intervention.' (LTU team member). In that meeting, there was agreement that students were likely to experience a relational gap as well as an awarding gap, and that coaching could address both. While the personal tutor system was also developed to address that gap, there are challenges with it, including the fact that there is an inherent power dynamic within personal tutor relationships. Implementation of the personal tutor system also varies across the universities, as does the level of relational skill on the part of personal tutors.

LTU is also developing a transition framework, underpinned by the understanding that relationships support transition at all stages. Strong relationships with tutors and peers support students to want to continue to Levels 5 and 6.

Co-created modules, where these are developed and taken up, may also address the belonging or relational gap, both between students and tutors and among students, though further exploration of their effectiveness is needed.

There may also be a generational or post-Covid element to the relational gap. A small number of students found it difficult to see the value of attending lectures in person when they could simply have joined online from home. Students did not talk about the long-term consequences of being part of the generation who were in lockdown for large parts of their GCSEs or A-levels and therefore were used to spending more time learning online from home, but it would be worth exploring whether there are generational effects here and if this begins to change as newer cohorts come through.

6.2.3 Supporting students with study skills

It was surprising to us, as researchers, how much students valued support around study skills from their coaches and how this seemed to be new for a surprising number of students. Universities routinely provide support around study skills through a range of channels and LTU is no exception. Yet, students did not talk about receiving other forms of study skills support and only one mentioned attending the Learning Hub. The evaluation did not set out to explore whether and how students had received study skills support prior to coaching, so we do not know how students may have experienced this or what might have meant that they either did not take it up or did not benefit from it as much as expected.

What we can conclude, though, is that several intervention factors contributed to the study skills support provided by coaches being experienced as especially helpful. These were:

- the foundation of trust and rapport built between coach and student, so students were able to share their struggles openly without fear of judgement
- strategies tailored to the individual student, based on an understanding of some of the student's underlying needs or circumstances
- the opportunity to try a strategy, reflect on whether it worked and then either build on it or try a different strategy
- a sense of accountability without judgement – knowing that the coach would follow up on whether a student had tried the strategy or not

It may be worth further exploring how study skills support can be provided with some of these intervention factors present and then testing whether these lead to similar mechanisms as coaching – namely, students breaking down goals and tasks into manageable steps, learning new skills and reframing limiting beliefs.

6.2.4 Timing and duration of coaching sessions

Although six coaching sessions were allocated to each student, the actual number of sessions varied considerably, with students taking up anywhere between one and 14 sessions. Seven students took up more than six sessions and these students were also the ones that said that more sessions would have benefited them even further. The coaching provider noted that their standard offer is usually 12 sessions, but this was reduced to six for this pilot to ensure that more students could benefit within a limited budget.

Coaches were not so sure about this, as they were concerned about encouraging dependency, and students also acknowledged that this would have been a risk if they had received more sessions. In the light of the discussion above about the potential relational gap that students may experience, it is possible that students may not have been looking for more coaching per se, but more for the continuation of a positive relationship that had supported them. Students could choose the frequency of sessions, usually weekly or fortnightly, occasionally monthly. There is no evidence for a link between frequency of sessions and coaching outcomes, nor between frequency of sessions and requests for further sessions.

We spoke to one student who had received one coaching session. Although that student did not return to coaching as they had particularly challenging personal circumstances at the time, they found that just that one hour benefited them and supported them to develop skills and techniques that they continued to use months after the session.

Students had mixed views about the duration of sessions. Some wanted longer sessions, while others would have found shorter sessions more useful especially at the start until rapport had been developed. Some of the neurodivergent students, in particular, found that an hour was a long time to concentrate and said that they would prefer shorter sessions.

Some students would have liked to have a follow-up session with their coach perhaps six months after the end of coaching, particularly if they had successes to share.

There were also mixed views about the point in a student's university career when they would be ready for coaching. Several students, especially those at Level 6, said that they would have preferred to have received coaching earlier in their university career. Several students, unprompted, said that coaching would work if the student was ready to talk, to reflect and to change their behaviour. When prompted, some students who had said that they would have preferred coaching earlier also admitted that they would not perhaps have been as open to it if

it had been earlier. Coaches also emphasised the need for student readiness, and this concept of readiness and what it means could be further explored.

6.2.5 Sustaining coaching gains in the longer term

As we spoke to students within eight weeks of their last coaching session, some follow-up work would need to be done to understand the contexts and mechanisms that support students to sustain the gains they made during and immediately after coaching.

Students had varied experiences of sustaining gains they had made during coaching even over the short period since they had finished. Some found that they had slipped back once coaching had finished, while others had sustained some new beliefs and behaviours but found others more difficult. Still others had taken longer to embed habits at the start but were now seeing some steady improvement. As several said, their life circumstances continued to be complicated and this made it more challenging to sustain the gains they had made or stick to helpful routines.

Changing beliefs and behaviours is not easy, especially when these beliefs and behaviours have become habitual. Coaching may support some students to make sustained gains, while others may need more support at later stages.

6.3 Caveats and limitations

6.3.1 Student engagement and attainment data

Although LTU collects detailed student engagement data, this proved to be less useful than expected in understanding students' engagement than we expected. The week-by-week data had many fluctuations and attendance data was sometimes inaccurately captured or was missing for a whole class. This meant that it would have required considerable manual cleaning to be useful. We therefore decided to use the monthly engagement stage data as the formal record of the students' level of engagement, but this was only helpful for students at stages 1 or 2[5]. We therefore relied more on students' own perceptions of their engagement than we had planned, but students were able to share tangible examples of ways in which they were engaging with their degree programme that they had not done before.

Student attainment data was also not fully available at the time of writing, as many of the students in our sample had deferred modules or are graduating in December. While the data that is available does show improved attainment for six out of the seven students for whom results are known, we do not know whether this is in line with what would have been expected anyway. Therefore no clear conclusions can be drawn from this. A follow-up evaluation, covering attainment data and exploring how coaching gains were sustained, might be helpful, but it may be difficult to re-interview Level 6 students who have left university, due to the challenges both in contacting students and in them choosing to participate in follow-up.

6.3.2 Students who did not take up coaching

We were unable to speak to any students who did not take up coaching or who signed up for coaching but then stopped responding before booking their first session. This affected our

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[5] Engagement risk stage 1 is the lowest level of risk monitored by LTU and prompts SLEO intervention. Stage 2 is medium risk and prompts programme lead intervention.

understanding of the mechanisms by which students engage with coaching, as well as our understanding of students' contexts (who takes up coaching, and who does not).

6.3.3 Coaching outcome data

The coaching provider conducted an internal evaluation in July 2025, and this was shared with the researchers in late November 2025, which was unfortunately too late in the process for the internal evaluation findings to be incorporated into this evaluation report. The internal report is based on feedback given by 14 of 26 students. It includes limited quantitative data (a rating of their coaching experience and self-rating against their coaching goals) and more detailed qualitative data covering what they enjoyed about the coaching and the difference it made to them. Those students who completed the feedback showed high average rates of progress against their coaching goals (from initial average ratings of between two and three out of 10, to post-coaching ratings of between six and eight out of 10) but the report does not show individual variation within this. Qualitative statements made by students in the internal coaching report provide further support for the key mechanisms that have been identified in this report, including the importance of the student/coach relationship, breaking goals down into manageable chunks and supporting students with organisation, planning and time management.

6.3.4 Detailed demographic data

We did not collect detailed demographic data about students. We did not collect data on disability, health conditions, neurodivergence or students' economic circumstances, though we made space for students to disclose these if they wished. We made this decision for ethical reasons. This means that we are not able to draw robust conclusions about the extent to which these circumstances may have affected students' engagement with either coaching or with their degree programme.

6.3.5 Other caveats

- There was more variation in the number of coaching sessions taken up by students than we expected. This may have affected students' experience and outcomes although we did not find strong evidence that students who had more sessions experienced better outcomes.
- There was also more variation in how students were identified and put forward for coaching than we expected. Again, we did not find strong evidence that this affected outcomes.
- We were also not able to fully measure or identify the value of the Associate Professor's involvement in supporting engagement in coaching. We have discussed this further in our findings related to Cluster 1.
- We could have brought in student researcher contributions more - they were involved in coding and contributed to the analysis meetings but perhaps could have been more involved in the development of the report. Ideally they would also have been involved in interviewing.

6.4 Conclusion

6.4.1 Theory of Change

The research confirmed some aspects of the theory of change, while refuting or refining others. Our updated theory of change is summarised here, and the diagram can be found in Appendix B.

1. If students have not been engaged in coaching or know little about coaching, then proactive contact from University staff can support them to engage with coaching, because it can encourage them to feel that coaching is worth trying.
2. If students have not had non-judgmental support (and sometimes even if they have), then coaching can support them to build self-awareness, because the range of techniques used by coaches support students to feel comfortable and share more openly.
3. If students have limiting beliefs, then coaching supports them to gain confidence and develop new beliefs about themselves, because coaches actively create opportunities for students to surface and reframe limiting beliefs and to experience and reflect on small successes.
4. If students had previously struggled with setting and achieving goals, then coaching supports them to achieve their coaching goals, either because students break goals down into manageable steps, or because they are motivated by accountability to their coach.
5. If students were struggling with organisation and time management, and especially if they were neurodivergent, coaching can support them to achieve their goals, because they learn new tools and skills that are relevant to them and begin to organise and manage their time better.
6. If students had not previously asked for help for lecturers, then coaching supports them to do so, and if lecturers were responsive then this supports students to engage more in their degree programme, because students develop a better understanding of what support is available and approach their lecturers for support.
7. If students were well resourced and had the headspace to engage well, then coaching supported them to engage in their degree programme, because they felt able to engage fully in both coaching and their degree programme.

6.4.2 Key Insights

- We knew relationships would be central to coaching, but had underestimated just how much the relationship mattered to students. This was particularly evident in relation to the development of study skills and habits. By working closely with their coaches in a relationship of trust, students were often able to change habits that had been entrenched, often for years. Students could not always articulate how coaches created a sense of comfort but they definitely felt it! This led us to speculate on whether students were experiencing a relational gap at university that was filled by coaching.
- Students' circumstances were often complicated. Coaching could help with some issues, for example challenges in relationships, but other issues such as health issues or bereavement generally led students to step back from coaching. Coaching may not be the right intervention for students in particularly complex circumstances especially when financial insecurity and personal or family health difficulties are in the mix.

- Coaching was intended to support 'global majority' students to engage in their degree programme, to help mitigate the awarding gap between 'global majority' and white students at the university. Students rarely disclosed experiences of overt racism and racism in general was not discussed in interviews or in coaching. However, while coaching can mitigate some of the effects of racism on individual students and support their resilience, it is no substitute for system-level interventions that reduce institutional racism.

6.4.3 Recommendations

For future iterations of the Coaching the Gap programme

- Find creative ways to inform students about the nature of coaching and how it can support them. Use student voice where possible.
- Use a range of channels to reach students including text and WhatsApp to support them to book sessions.
- Expand flexibility of timing and duration of coaching sessions: including the option for shorter (30-min) sessions.
- Explore how to integrate coaching with broader student support including academic support.
- Consider whether coaching could or should be made available to Level 4 students.
- Consider which students at what engagement stages would most benefit from coaching.

For LTU

- Explore ways to support student belonging, including relationships with trusted staff members.
- Explore relational approaches to supporting students with study skills.
- Follow up with students who engaged in Coaching the Gap to understand if gains have been sustained and what mechanisms support this.

For Higher Education Providers exploring coaching interventions

- Consider how to create the conditions for coaches to build rapport with students – particularly coaching skill and the independence of coaches from internal power dynamics.
- Consider how to target coaching interventions and how they inter-relate with other interventions.
- Consider how to support goal-setting and study-skill building as potential supports for students both within and outside coaching.
- Consider whether longer timelines for coaching interventions may be more effective (e.g. spreading out coaching over a full year) and whether this would also support more robust evaluation.

For future research

- Explore how best to use management information data to support evaluations, especially in situations where the data needs extensive cleaning.

- Explore the role of 'global majority' role models, whether in coaching interventions or other aspects of Higher Education support.
- Explore how student belonging affects student outcomes and what interventions may support student belonging.
- Conduct longitudinal studies on coaching interventions to understand how coaching gains can be sustained.
- Explore the role of anti-racist and participatory research methods in higher education.
- Explore appropriate ways to involve peer or near-peer researchers throughout the research process.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Project management

A1: Timeline

A2: Roles and Responsibilities

A3: Ethical considerations

Appendix B: Theory of change illustrations

Appendix C: Data collection tools

Appendix A: Project management

A1: Project timeline

Date/timeline	Activity
November 2024	- Ethics approval confirmed - Inform students about the evaluation and gain informed consent - Coaching begins - Fortnightly data dashboards for JISC and SITS data start to be shared with evaluators - Coaching provider baseline survey data to be shared with evaluators 27 November: First wellbeing workshop – feedback collected
December 2024	- Finalise interview topic guide for pilot interviews - Finalise recruitment of peer researchers
January 2025	- Initial training for peer researchers - Pilot interviews – 4 students and 1 coach 2nd wellbeing workshop – feedback collected
February 2025	Analysis of pilot interviews, refinement of ToC and interview topic guide
March 2025	- Interim report shared with TASO - Interviews begin - Once 4 interviews completed, review data, refine ToC and topic guide
April 2025	- Coaching completed for all students - Interviews continue
May 2025	Interviews continue with some refinement of ToC and topic guide
June 2025	- Interviews completed - Coding starts - First co-analysis meeting with student researchers and LTU team
July/August 2025	- Coding completed - Report drafting begins
Sept/Oct 2025	- Recommendations meeting with LTU and TASO teams - Review of attainment data - Finalisation of report

A2: Roles and responsibilities

Organisation	Name	Role and responsibilities
TASO	Tatjana Damjanovic Omar Khan	As the funder, TASO's staff will: ● Oversee the budgetary requirements of this work ● Monitor the quality of published documents, with additional external quality assurance ● Take part in theory of change workshops ● Offer general organisational support throughout the project ● Publish and publicise any relevant findings in due course.
Tharani Learning and Research/Social Qual	Amira Tharani Emma Roberts	As the evaluators, they will: ● Work with LTU and the coaching provider on the development of the theory of change ● Develop the interview guides ● Develop the overall research design ● Recruit, train and ensure quality control of student interviewers ● Analyse the data ● Work with LTU and the coaching provider on developing the final theory of change. ● Write up findings from the research
Leeds Trinity University	Syra Shakir Ruth Squire Ameera Ali	As the higher education provider, staff will: ● Support the external provider with the delivery of the intervention ● Share quantitative student data with evaluators ● Support with contacting students and scheduling interviews ● Support with training student researchers ● Support the running of the 'wrap-around' support ● Join the co-analysis meeting
Coaching Provider	The Coaching Provider CEO and 4 coaches	As the third party provider delivering the intervention, staff will:

Organisation	Name	Role and responsibilities
		- Deliver the intervention in the form of coaching sessions - Share pre/post survey data with evaluators - Be interviewed by student researchers - CEO will join the co-analysis meeting
Leeds Trinity University	Student researchers	As peer researchers supporting the evaluation, they will: - Code all the interviews - Contribute to the analysis - Join the co-analysis meeting

A3: Ethical and methodological considerations

A3.1 Analytical strategy: methodological fidelity

How the five types of fidelity frame the analysis in this evaluation are listed below:

- **Methodological fidelity**: The final report outlines clearly how the data was coded, how themes were developed and how retroductive analysis was conducted.
- **Fidelity to research participants**: All students and coaches who have been interviewed have the opportunity to review quotes from them in the context of the report.
- **Fidelity to the data:** McAllum et al. emphasise a need for clarity about where there is a clear material reality being described and where the social or material world is open to alternative interpretations. We have held this in mind in the analysis, particularly where students and coaches may describe their understanding of the role of systemic racism in their experiences.
- **Fidelity to ourselves as researchers:** Both evaluators have assumptions about how systemic racism operates in the world, and about the relationship between individual agency and systemic factors. One evaluator has lived experience of being part of a racialised minority group and experiencing Islamophobia as a student. Both evaluators have had personal experiences of coaching and knowing coaches which will also affect our understanding of how coaching works. Both evaluators are also older than the student population. We interrogated our own and each other's assumptions both through the formal co-analysis workshop and less formally through the discussions and analysis that take place throughout the research process, and these will be identified in the report.
- **Fidelity to the readers**: McAllum et al. emphasise the importance of using 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), appropriate detail and parsimony to ensure that the report resonates with readers. In this case, we did our best to ensure that our findings and recommendations are useful to the higher education sector in the UK.

A3.2 Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the RKE Ethics and Integrity Committee at Leeds Trinity University. The approval reference is 2024-FSSE-STA-0045.

A3.3 Consent

Most of the evaluation is being undertaken by the external evaluators to minimise any pressure to engage that may arise due to existing relationships between students and LTU staff. Students and coaches will be provided with a verbal briefing/debriefing and debrief/information sheets outlining timelines for withdrawal and limitations so that they are appropriately briefed about the research and ethical requirements.

Participants will sign consent forms prior to interview, which outline the right to withdraw from the evaluation at any point. If students withdraw from the intervention, they will be asked if they wish to continue with the evaluation. They will also be able to withdraw from interviews and choose not to answer specific questions.

A3.4 Discussion of difficult experiences

There is a risk that participants and researchers may be subjected to potential psychological harm due to the discussion of distressing experiences. To enable students to participate safely, they will be offered adjustments such as taking breaks, having cameras off, having questions in advance or being interviewed by peer researchers.

A3.5 Disclosure of harm

Participants will be signposted to relevant LTU wellbeing and student support services where appropriate, or primary care services if necessary. Researchers will be able to form a support network to regularly meet, discuss, review and support each other.

A3.6 Data protection

The independent evaluators will store all interview, workshop and survey data in a secure folder with password protection and are fully compliant with GDPR. Only pseudonymised and de-identified data will be shared with LTU. We do not believe that it will be possible for students to be completely unidentifiable to LTU staff and/or close peers, and we will inform them of this risk in advance.

Interviews will be conducted on MS Teams. Peer researchers will edit the transcripts from their own interviews for accuracy. They will then share these with the evaluators using a secure file-transfer platform that is compatible with LTU's data storage policies. Data will then be deleted and the evaluators will pseudonymise the data.

Feedback data collection will take place anonymously via Microsoft forms and LTU licenced Padlet account and will be stored securely on the aforementioned LTU OneDrive. Anonymised feedback and individual outcomes and engagement data for students will be stored in an LTU OneDrive folder, accessible by the evaluators. At the end of the project, student data will be anonymised through the removal of connections to personal data. Data will be stored for 10 years (until Sept 2034) and the LTU project leads will oversee deletion of research data held on LTU servers. Students will be briefed on the use of their data and rights to withdraw or access data.

Interview data including recordings, transcripts and analysis will be stored on a secure server that meets LTU security requirements. Data will be retained until one year after the end of the project (until Sept 2026) when all raw data will be deleted. Anonymised analysis or reports may be retained where no participants are identifiable, and data is not personal or sensitive.

A Data Protection Impact Assessment has been carried out for this project and reviewed by TASO's Data Protection Officer. Data sharing agreements have been signed between LTU and the external provider as well as between LTU, the evaluators and TASO.

A4: Risks and mitigations

Part of evaluation	Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation strategy	Risk owner
Intervention	Project timings are tight and students only access a small number of coaching sessions. This may limit the ability of the evaluation to detect any substantial impact	H	M	Previous Type 1 evaluations of Flourished Minds coaching suggest that even a small number of sessions can make some difference. [1] As the interviews are qualitative, we can ask questions about 'dosage' and understand what impact can be made in a short time and whether more time and more sessions would have been helpful.	**LTU team**

Part of evaluation	Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation strategy	Risk owner
Data collection – interviews with students	Students withdraw from the evaluation or drop out of coaching altogether	M	H	Ensure that students are fully informed about the evaluation, allay any concerns, offer students an option to speak to a student researcher, ensure that there is support available to students if they find aspects of the evaluation distressing	**Evaluators for evaluation, LTU for coaching**
Data collection – interviews with students	Students do not respond to requests to schedule interviews or do not turn up to interviews	M	H	Ensure students are fully informed about the evaluation, allay any concerns, follow up with students to schedule, ask LTU team to follow up with students to schedule	**Evaluators, with LTU support for mitigation**
Analysis and reporting	Stakeholders are concerned about negative findings and seek to influence reporting of findings	M	L	Develop a shared understanding that 'negative' findings are opportunities to learn and seek alternative approaches	**Evaluators**

Part of evaluation	Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation strategy	Risk owner
Evaluation design	Difficult to establish CMO clusters that genuinely differentiate between different experiences of the intervention	M	M	Keep refining CMO clusters through piloting the interviews and speaking to coaches as well as students	**Evaluators**
Data collection	Using student researchers, while it has many benefits, risks the robustness of the evaluation due to lack of experience in realist interviewing	H	M	Work very closely with student researchers in the pilot phase to ensure that they have a strong understanding of the theory of change and of realist interviewing	**Evaluators**

Appendix B: Original Theory of Change Diagram

Before / outside the coaching programme - supporting take-up of coaching

During the coaching programme - 'in the room' with the coach

After / outside the coaching programme - transferring coaching outcomes to their degree programme

Key
- Activities
- Intervention Factors
- Contexts
- Mechanisms
- Outcomes

- Proactive student contact - outbound calls to students to encourage them to take up coaching and other support
- Where students are not engaging in coaching and / or other student support services
- Students feel that taking up coaching and other support is **worthwhile**
- Students engage with coaching and/or other support available
- 6x 1-1 coaching sessions provided by Flourished Minds (online)
- 2x 1-hour wellbeing workshops (hybrid)
- Access to all other student support available to all students (not in scope for this evaluation)
- Students set coaching goals collaboratively with their coach
- Students feel motivated to achieve goals they have set for themselves
- Coaching is non-directive and non-judgmental
- Where students have not previously had non-directive and non-judgmental support
- Students feel safe to share openly with their coach
- Coaching provides opportunities for students to reflect on their beliefs and behaviours
- Where those beliefs and behaviours were previously blocking students' achievements of their goals
- Students gain insights into their beliefs and behaviours and how to challenge, reframe or overcome them
- Students discuss practical actions to achieve their goals within coaching sessions and wellbeing workshops
- Students have new knowledge or tools they can use to improve their wellbeing, manage their time and achieve their goals
- Students achieve the coaching goals they have set for themselves
- Where students' degree programme is also a psychologically safe environment for them
- Students feel safe to engage authentically with the material, their professors and their peers on their degree
- Where students have the financial security, stability in their personal lives, time and headspace to engage well
- Students feel resourced to spend time and effort on their degree programme
- Students engage more with their degree programme
- Students have improved attainment in their degree

Note – there are likely to be feedback loops in this theory of change – for example, as students feel better resourced to engage well, they are likely to be better able to engage with coaching and access the benefits of coaching as well as engaging more in their degree prog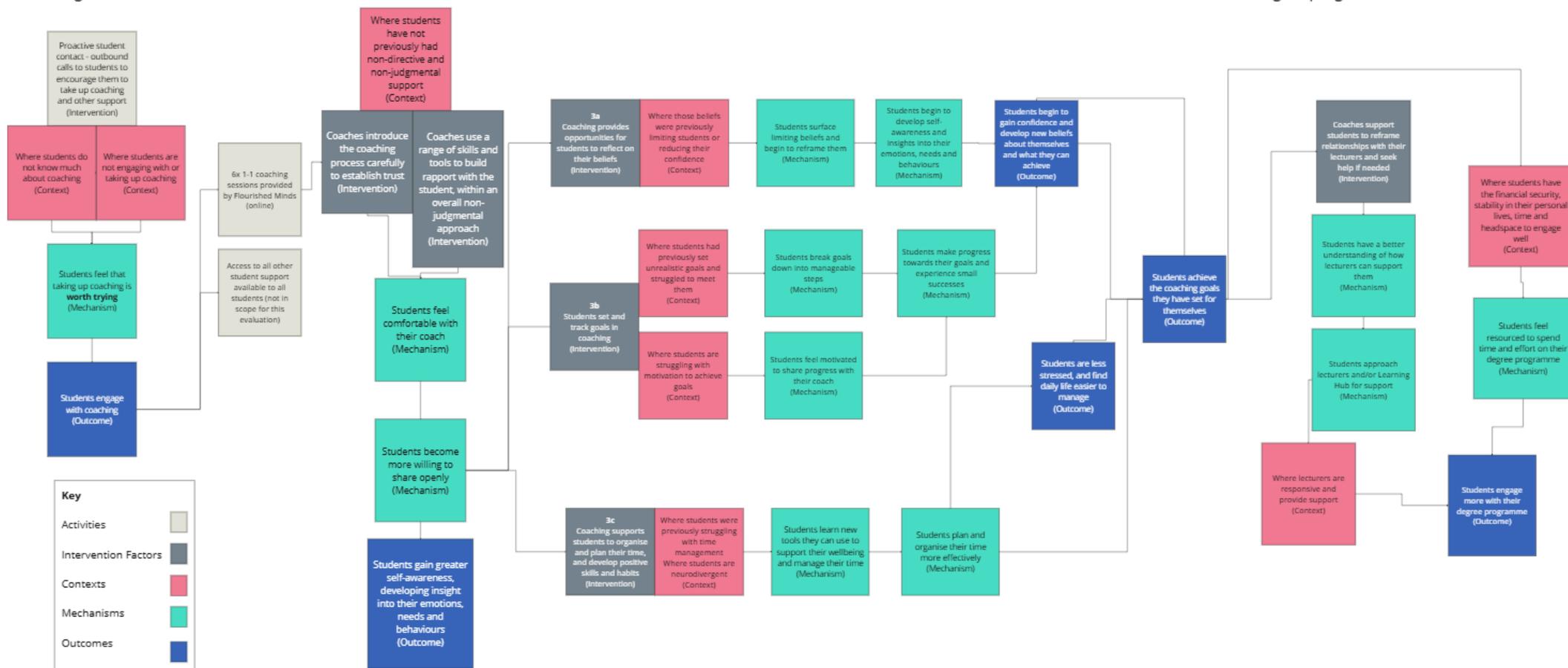ramme. These feedback loops are out of scope for this evaluation, as we are testing specific clusters of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes.

Revised Theory of Change diagram

Before / outside the coaching programme - supporting take-up of coaching

During the coaching programme - 'in the room' with the coach

After / outside the coaching programme - transferring coaching outcomes to their degree programme

Proactive student contact - outbound calls to students to encourage them to take up coaching and other support (Intervention)

Where students do not know much about coaching (Context)

Where students are not engaging with or taking up coaching (Context)

Students feel that taking up coaching is **worth trying** (Mechanism)

Students engage with coaching (Outcome)

6x 1-1 coaching sessions provided by Flourished Minds (online)

Access to all other student support available to all students (not in scope for this evaluation)

Where students have not previously had non-directive and non-judgmental support (Context)

Coaches introduce the coaching process carefully to establish trust (Intervention)

Coaches use a range of skills and tools to build rapport with the student, within an overall non-judgmental approach (Intervention)

Students feel comfortable with their coach (Mechanism)

Students become more willing to share openly (Mechanism)

Students gain greater self-awareness, developing insight into their emotions, needs and behaviours (Outcome)

3a Coaching provides opportunities for students to reflect on their beliefs (Intervention)

Where those beliefs were previously limiting students or reducing their confidence (Context)

Students surface limiting beliefs and begin to reframe them (Mechanism)

Students begin to develop self-awareness and insights into their emotions, needs and behaviours (Mechanism)

Students begin to gain confidence and develop new beliefs about themselves and what they can achieve (Outcome)

3b Students set and track goals in coaching (Intervention)

Where students had previously set unrealistic goals and struggled to meet them (Context)

Where students are struggling with motivation to achieve goals (Context)

Students break goals down into manageable steps (Mechanism)

Students feel motivated to share progress with their coach (Mechanism)

Students make progress towards their goals and experience small successes (Mechanism)

Students achieve the coaching goals they have set for themselves (Outcome)

Students are less stressed, and find daily life easier to manage (Outcome)

3c Coaching supports students to organise and plan their time, and develop positive skills and habits (Intervention)

Where students were previously struggling with time management Where students are neurodivergent (Context)

Students learn new tools they can use to support their wellbeing and manage their time (Mechanism)

Students plan and organise their time more effectively (Mechanism)

Coaches support students to reframe relationships with their lecturers and seek help if needed (Intervention)

Where students have the financial security, stability in their personal lives, time and headspace to engage well (Context)

Students have a better understanding of how lecturers can support them (Mechanism)

Students approach lecturers and/or Learning Hub for support (Mechanism)

Students feel resourced to spend time and effort on their degree programme (Mechanism)

Where lecturers are responsive and provide support (Context)

Students engage more with their degree programme (Outcome)

Key

Activities

Intervention Factors

Contexts

Mechanisms

Outcomes

2

Appendix C: Data collection tools

C1: Topic Guide: interviews with students

Introduction (5 mins)

- Introduce yourself and give a brief overview of the evaluation :
    - We are evaluating the Coaching the Gap project because we want to understand how it makes a difference and in what circumstances. We'll be interviewing as many of the coaching participants and coaches as we can and then putting the findings together into a report that will be published, so other universities can understand what works, and what doesn't work, in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing.

- Set out how the interview will work:
    - We'll speak for between an hour and 1.5 hours
    - There are no right or wrong answers, we want to hear your honest views, opinions and experiences.
    - Sometimes we will suggest an idea about how coaching works and invite you to test whether it worked that way for you – please feel free to say no it didn't, if that's true!
    - If you don't want to answer a question you don't have to.
    - If you want to skip a question and come back to it you can
    - If you need a minute or to write down some notes before you answer a question, just say so – that's always fine.
    - Equally, if you need to take a quick break and come back, please let us know – that's also always fine.
    - You have the right to withdraw at any point and also to ask us to delete your data .

- Confirm how we will store and use the data and confirm consent
    - We will record and auto-transcribe the interview
    - This will be held in a shared folder between Amira and Emma. We're hoping to train some student researchers, and if we do they might also see the recording and transcript.
    - When we analyse the data, others at LTU might see quotes but they will be anonymised.
    - When we write up the report we will try to check quotes with you   before we finalise and publish the final report in September/October. If you're leaving before then please leave us your contact details if you want us to check quotes with you.
    - Confirm: consent for the interview, consent for recording, consent for using quotes in the report.

Warm-up questions

To start with, I just want to confirm how many sessions you had and when.

Note – this is checking IPE dimension of Exposure.

1. How many coaching sessions have you had?
2. When was your most recent coaching session?

Section 1: starting coaching (5-7 mins)

Note to interviewers – this is testing Cluster 1 of the ToC. This also covers the IPE dimension of Recruitment.

I'm now going to ask you a bit about what it was like getting started with coaching.

3. How did you find out about the coaching programme?
4. What was it like booking your first coaching session?
   a. Did you have any support to help book your first session?
   b. If so, what difference did that support make?

Section 2: coaching goals (10 mins)

Note to interviewers: this may give us information about the following key mechanisms and contexts:

Mechanisms:

- *Students gaining insight into their own beliefs and behaviours – reframing*
- *Students feeling safe to share openly with their coach*

Contexts:

- *Whether students have previously had non-directive or non-judgmental support*

Intervention factors:

- *Non-directive and non-judgmental nature of coaching – what does that mean to students*
- *Whether coaching provides opportunities for students to reflect on their previous beliefs and behaviours*

These are quite broad questions as we're still in the first half of the interview – further questions will explore the detail of mechanisms a bit further.

All these questions will also give us insights into the IPE dimensions of Quality and Stakeholder Perspective

   5. Tell us a bit more about the goals you set during coaching. First, what were your coaching goals?

Note – please ask all of subquestions a-d – please ask subquestions a and b about each goal.

   a. How did you get on with [goal 1, goal 2, goal 3].
   b. How do you feel now about [goal 1, goal 2, goal 3]
   c. What enabled you to achieve your goals? This might be things that happened during the coaching or other things going on outside of coaching.
   d. What might have made it more difficult to achieve your goals? Prompt for both what was going on within and outside coaching, if student doesn't share this initially.

   6. We would like to understand more about coaching supports people to achieve/progress towards their goals. How do you think coaching helped you achieve/progress towards your goals?

Note – adapt this question if student doesn't feel that they've fully achieved their goals.

Note – if the student has already said a lot about how coaching helped them in their answer to Q5c, then skip straight to subquestion a or b below as appropriate.

Note – subquestions a and b are not mandatory – if already answered.

      a. *What was it about the coaching relationship that helped?*
      b. *Were there particular moments that made a difference?*

Section 3 – understanding outcomes of coaching (15 mins)

We're now going to broaden out a bit to explore the difference that the coaching programme made to you – both personally and in relation to your university degree programme.

Note to interviewers – these are still broad questions but bear in mind the mechanisms around psychological safety in the coaching room and on their degree programme.

    7. What difference, if any, do you think the coaching programme made to you?

        a. Can you give an example of this?

Note – ask Qs 8 and 9 as follow-ups to Q7 – bring in anything they've said in response to Q7 as a lead in to Q8 or Q9. If they've already said that coaching changed how they thought/felt about themselves or their degree programme, no need to ask the closed yes/no question – you can just move into finding out more.

No need to use all the prompts for 8 and 9, but make sure you probe in Q9 about psychological safety on the degree programme in response to either 9c or 9d. If students say something about attainment then pick up on this but don't push for it.

    8. In what ways, if at all, did the coaching change how you see yourself or feel about yourself? Can you tell me about that?

        a. Was there something specific that the coach did or said that contributed to this?
        b. What, if anything, helped this shift to happen?

    9. How, if at all, did coaching change the way that experience your degree programme   ?

        a. What changed for you (if anything)?

        b. What felt different in how you engage with your studies?

        c. What has stayed the same?

        d. [Ask if appropriate] Talk me through something that happened or something you did in your coaching session that contributed to any change

    10. There are lots of ideas about how coaching actually works, and we think it probably works differently in different places for different people. One of those ideas is that coaching works when people feel safe to share openly and honestly with their coach. Has it worked like that for you?

Note – Q10 is the first question that directly discusses a specific mechanism – psychological safety with the coach. If they've mentioned this in an earlier question, feel free to jump straight to this set of questions when they do. You don't need to ask all the subquestions but please prioritise subquestions a and e.

This may also give us some insight on quality – looking at what the coach said or did.

      a. Can you describe a moment when you felt safe to share openly during the coaching process?
      b. What do you think contributed to that feeling?
      c. Was there something that the coach did or said that contributed to this?
      d. How, if at all, did the coach also being from the global majority make a difference?
      e. What might have helped you feel more safe to share?
      f. Looking back, do you think you would have achieved [your coaching goals] without feeling safe to share with your coach? Why or why not?

Section 4: contexts and circumstances (10-15 mins)

We're now going to ask a bit about what was going on in your life during the coaching programme. Sometimes people might have a lot going on and a lot of difficult circumstances – please only share what feels comfortable for you to share in this context.

Note – this is testing cluster 5 – having the resources to engage well. This also covers IPE dimension of Context – and may pick up appropriateness and/or adaptation.

Offer a break if needed during this section and go very sensitively here – students may disclose things that are very painful for them.

11. Could you tell us a bit about what else was going on in your life that might have made it more challenging to engage at university?

    a. Could you tell us a bit more about the effect this had on you?

12. Were you able to talk about this in your coaching? If so, what was this like?

    a. How, if at all, did talking about it in coaching help you?

13. What else, apart from coaching, would have made it easier for you to engage with your degree programme, given the challenges you were facing?

    a. Is there any practical support that would have made a difference?

Section 5: Questions to ask if time allows

14. You've had [x] sessions. Was this enough? Tell me about that

15. [If coaching process has finished] Talk me through the end of the coaching relationship. How was it when it ended? How did you know / decide it was the last session?

16. Have you accessed any other support services at the University? If so, in what ways is coaching similar / different?

17. [Only ask if Syra's role has come up previously]. Tell me more about Syra. What role / support did she provide?

Section 6: anything else

We're coming towards the end of our conversation – just a few more questions to give you the space to say anything else that feels important to you, and to ask you for your feedback on what you would change.

Note – Q14 covers IPE dimensions of quality and programme differentiation.

18. If you could change something about the programme to make it work more effectively here/with students like you, what would you change and why?

19. If another university was thinking about running a coaching programme like this one, what should they do to make sure it really works?

20. What else do you think we need to know to really understand whether and how coaching has made a difference to you?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us [say more about how you've found the conversation]. I'll just explain briefly what will happen next:

- We've got the recording and the automated transcript. We'll be storing that in a folder that only Amira and Emma have access to.
- We'll be writing up a final report over the summer. If we use any quotes from you we will try to check them with you before the report is fully published.
- We'll also make sure that we share a copy of the final report   with you when it's ready to be published – assuming we have your contact details.
- If there's anything that you feel you didn't get a chance to say that you want to say, you can always email us or send us a text or a voice note.
- We know that talking about your experience can be a lot – have you got some self-care planned for after this?
- We are around for support if you need it, and you can also talk to Syra or Ameera if this has brought up anything that you want to process further.

C2: Interview questions for coaches

Introduction (5 mins)

- Introduce yourself and give a brief overview of the evaluation:
  - We are evaluating the Coaching the Gap project because we want to understand how it makes a difference and in what circumstances. We'll be interviewing as many of the coaching participants and coaches as we can and then putting the findings together into a report that will be published, so other universities can understand what works, and what doesn't work, in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing.
  - This is a pilot interview – that means we're testing the questions out to see if they make sense. If a question doesn't make sense, or you need us to repeat or

rephrase something please let us know – that will really help us to improve the questions.

- Set out how the interview will work:
  - We'll speak for between an hour and 1.5 hours
  - There are no right or wrong answers, we want to hear your honest views, opinions and experiences.
  - Sometimes we will suggest an idea about how coaching works and invite you to test whether it worked that way for the students you coach – please feel free to say no it didn't, if that's true!
  - If you don't want to answer a question you don't have to.
  - If you want to skip a question and come back to it you can
  - If you need a minute or to write down some notes before you answer a question, just say so – that's always fine.
  - Equally, if you need to take a quick break and come back, please let us know – that's also always fine.
  - You have the right to withdraw at any point and also to ask us to delete your data.
  - We know that you have confidentiality agreements in place with the students you coach. We will ask you to tell us stories from inside the coaching room – feel free to change identifying details or use a composite of several students to maintain confidentiality.
- Confirm how we will store and use the data and confirm consent
  - We will record and auto-transcribe the interview
  - This will be held in a shared folder between Amira and Emma. We're hoping to train some student researchers, and if we do they might also see the recording and transcript.
  - When we analyse the data, others at LTU might see quotes but they will be anonymised.
  - When we write up the report we will try to check quotes with you before we finalise and publish the final report in September/October.
  - Confirm: consent for the interview, consent for recording, consent for using quotes in the report.

Warm-up questions (5-10 mins)

To start with, I just want to confirm the number of students you've coached on this project and get a bit of a sense of where they're at in terms of sessions.

1. Could you tell me how many students you've coached?
2. Are any of the students you've coached just starting out with you? (ie 2 sessions or fewer)
3. Have any of the students you've coached had more than six sessions? (if yes, come back to this later).

Coaching mechanisms – how does coaching work? (20 mins)

1. What have you noticed about how coaching works for students in this programme?
   a. [prompt if needed] What types of conversations, moments or activities seem to spark change?
2. Let's discuss how students engage with coaching. What differences have you noticed in how students experience and respond to coaching?

a. What factors seem to shape or influence those differences? [prompt if needed: personal circumstances, coaching style, external pressures, confidence etc]

3. Can you describe a time when a student had a 'lightbulb' moment during coaching?

a. [Prompts if needed] What led up to that moment? What difference did it make for them?

4. To what extent have you experienced students for whom coaching doesn't 'land' or doesn't feel like a good fit? What do you think that was?

Coaching outcomes – changes for students (20 mins)

1. Based on your experience, what difference is coaching making for students in this programme? Feel free to share different types of change – academic, emotional, personal etc

2. To what extent is coaching shaping how students think or feel about their degree programme?

a. In what ways, if at all, did that lead students to do things differently?

b. What made is easier or harder for students to apply what they learned?

3. What types of progress or achievements do you most commonly see in students who engage well with coaching? Have you noticed any differences based on students' starting points or circumstances?

Contexts – what shapes coaching effectiveness (20 mins)

In this next session, we'll talk a bit about your coaching approach and how that might support students. We'll also talk a bit about ending coaching with some students and how that's been going.

11. Could you talk us through your coaching approach? Perhaps give us some examples of how you'd approach the beginning, middle or end of a coaching session?

a. To what extent is this similar / different for different coaches involved in this programme?

b. To what extent is this modified for the student? What can you tell us about that?

12. Could you talk us through how you see the difference between coaching, mentoring and counselling?

a. Were there occasions when you have moved from one form into another – eg taken on the role of a mentor?

b. What role, if any, does advice giving play in your coaching approach?

13. We're interested in how students feel safe to share openly in coaching. How do you recognise when a student feels safe?

14. How do you create that safe environment? Can you give examples? [prompt if needed: things you say or do? Anything about disclosure?]

15. We'd like to ask about the coaches. In your opinion and experience on this programme, how does a coach's identity or background influence the coaching experience? [prompt if needed: have you noticed anything about how students respond to you as a coach based on your positionality or identity?]

16. We'd also like to ask you a bit about how you manage endings.
    a. Have you ended coaching with any students yet? What was that like?
    b. For students that have asked for more sessions, what have you noticed? How will you go about ending with them when the time comes?
    c. What do you think is the right number of sessions for these students?

<u>Wrapping up and final reflections (5-10 mins)</u>

17. If you could change anything about this coaching programme to make it work more effectively with these students, what would it be and why?

18. What else do you think we need to know to really understand how coaching works with these students?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us [say more about how you've found the conversation]. I'll just explain briefly what will happen next:

- We've got the recording and the automated transcript. We'll be storing that in a folder that only Amira and Emma have access to.
- We'll be writing up an interim report in March, and a final report over the summer. If we use any quotes from you we will try to check them with you before the report is fully published.
- We'll also make sure that we share a copy of the final report with you when it's ready to be published – assuming we have your contact details.
- If there's anything that you feel you didn't get a chance to say that you want to say, you can always email us or send us a text or a voice note.