



Coaching for Belonging: Redesigning HE Personal Development at B&FC

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71957/1h2h4a36>

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Abstract

A growing body of research highlights the importance of belonging, confidence and academic identity in supporting student engagement, persistence and success in higher education. This paper examines the redesign of the Higher Education Personal Development (PD) curriculum at Blackpool and The Fylde College, where coaching has been embedded as an approach to supporting these outcomes. Through a coaching-informed curriculum, belonging is woven throughout the student journey, creating opportunities for students and apprentices to develop self-awareness, confidence, autonomy and connection. The paper discusses the rationale for this approach and its potential contribution to student belonging, success and retention.

Introduction

In Higher Education (HE), a sense of belonging is increasingly recognised as central to student retention, self-awareness, confidence, autonomy and connection. For many students, particularly those entering HE through non-traditional routes, belonging is more than simply feeling welcomed at the start of a course.

This work draws on Strayhorn's (2019) conceptualisation of belonging as students feeling connected, valued, respected and that they matter within their institution therefore impacting on the extent to which students can see themselves as capable of succeeding within HE.

This paper explores the redevelopment of the HE Personal Development (PD) curriculum at B&FC through a coaching-informed lens, positioning belonging not as an additional theme,



yet as a purposeful thread running through the student journey from induction to progression.

This work has emerged from my role as HE Academic Achievement Manager, where current practice and research focus on embedding coaching principles into the HE PD curriculum.

The HE PD curriculum at B&FC is undertaken by all HE students and apprentices as part of their programme, built into timetabled sessions and delivered through group tutorials, enrichment and online self-paced resources.

The intention is to create a PD curriculum where students and apprentices feel connected, capable and seen. Rather than viewing PD as a series of isolated sessions or online resources, the redesigned model seeks to make it a transformative, student-centred curriculum that supports academic, personal and professional growth. This is particularly important in a HE context where students' lives, responsibilities and prior experiences can shape how they engage with learning, confidence and future planning.

Starting Points

The starting point for this work was a recognition that belonging must be intentionally designed for. It cannot be assumed that students will automatically develop confidence, peer connection or a positive academic identity simply by entering HE. This is especially relevant at B&FC, where a high percentage are mature students and may be balancing study with employment, caring responsibilities or other commitments. These factors can influence motivation, engagement and perceptions of success (Martenstyn and Grant, 2022). Within this context, coaching provides a useful framework as it encourages students and apprentices to reflect on who they are, how they learn, what they value and where they want to go.

When this work began, I shared with colleague's research around high performance and the concept that students should not be encouraged to measure themselves against others, but instead to focus on their own development (Faulkner, as cited in Burchard, 2017). This offers a useful entry point into discussions about comparison, confidence and belonging. Starting something new can be uncomfortable, particularly when students are surrounded by peers who may appear more confident or experienced. By naming this experience and creating space to discuss it, PD can help students realise that uncertainty is not a personal deficit, it a common part of career development and growth.



This matters because confidence is not simply an individual trait; it is shaped by our environment, relationships and opportunities. In response to these challenges, a coaching-informed approach was adopted within the PD curriculum. In this context, coaching-informed refers to the integration of coaching principles, including reflective questioning, self-awareness, goal setting and strengths recognition, into curriculum design and learning activities. Rather than positioning tutors as experts who provide solutions, the approach encourages students to explore their own thinking, identify barriers and develop strategies that support their learning and development.

This approach was considered particularly appropriate within a Personal Development curriculum, where the aim is not only to support academic success yet also to develop the confidence, autonomy and self-awareness skills that underpin long-term achievement. The decision was also informed by my professional background as a qualified and accredited coach and previous experience of applying coaching approaches within educational settings, where they have been used to support learner self-awareness, confidence, autonomy and connection. A coaching-informed curriculum therefore provided a natural extension of this practice, allowing coaching principles to be embedded at scale and made accessible to all students.

Through this approach, students are encouraged to notice how they respond to new situations, how comparison affects them and how their inner dialogue may support or limit their progress. In this sense, belonging is closely linked to self-awareness. When students begin to understand their responses, they can make more conscious choices about how they want to act, learn and engage. This is an empowering approach because it positions students as active participants in their own development rather than passive recipients of support.

Personal Development Curriculum

The redesigned PD curriculum therefore includes themes that allow students to engage with belonging from multiple perspectives. The themes create multiple points for students and apprentices to build confidence, connect with peers and develop the self-awareness associated with personal and academic growth. The structure also allows PD to move beyond a narrow focus on employability, instead supporting students to explore identity, wellbeing, values, relationships and progression in an integrated way.

The Personal Development curriculum was identified as a key vehicle for addressing belonging because it provides a structured opportunity to support students' personal, academic and professional development throughout their time at B&FC. Previously, the



curriculum was organised around more discrete themes and activities, with less explicit focus on belonging and self-development. The redesign started over the last academic year through consultation with academic staff, student-facing services and senior leaders, ensuring alignment with institutional priorities. Drawing on previous experience of using coaching approaches within educational and pastoral contexts, the curriculum was restructured around coaching-informed themes that encourage reflection, self-awareness and meaningful engagement at key points in the student journey.

The PD curriculum is delivered through a combination of online self-directed resources, in-person workshops and one-to-one coaching opportunities. Students are introduced to the curriculum through induction, PD sessions and targeted communications, and can engage with both core curriculum activities and additional support opportunities where appropriate. This blended approach recognises that students may engage in different ways and at different points in their journey. Some may benefit from structured group activities that build peer connection, while others may need space for individual reflection, personalised goal setting or coaching conversations. Across these formats, the aim is to help students develop their "inner coach": that internal capacity to reflect, reframe, set goals and take purposeful action. The coaching-informed model has now started to be embedded within the curriculum for the last academic year, providing an ongoing framework through which students can develop confidence, belonging and self-regulatory skills over time.

Goal setting

Goal setting is a significant aspect of the redesigned model. Goal setting is a key feature of coaching-informed practice because it encourages students to identify what matters to them and take ownership of their development. By creating meaningful goals and recognising progress, students can build confidence, motivation and a stronger sense of agency within their academic journey.

Within the HE PD curriculum, students and apprentices will have multiple opportunities to engage with resources that support them to identify meaningful goals and the steps needed to achieve them. This work is supported by Progress Tutors across curriculum areas at B&FC, who play a key role in contextualising PD resources within specific programmes of study and facilitating Progress Reviews. These tutors are central to creating spaces where students feel they belong, helping to bridge the gap between generic development content and the student's own academic, vocational and personal context.



The approach to goal setting draws on the Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) process called well-formed outcomes, using questions such as, “What stops you from having your desired outcome already?” and “What resources will you need to help you create what you want?”. These questions encourage students to move beyond surface-level targets and develop a deeper understanding of the rationale, barriers and resources connected to their goals. This supports learner autonomy and accountability because the student is not simply being given a target; they are being invited to understand it, shape it and identify the steps required to move towards it.

Solution-focused coaching is an approach which is said to support motivation and success where goals connected to strengths, self-motivation, personal values, growth and connectedness are associated with greater wellbeing and goal attainment (Sheldon and Elliot, 1999; Sheldon and Kasser, 1998). Within the redesigned PD curriculum, this provides an important justification for focusing on more than academic behaviours alone. If students are to thrive academically, personally and professionally, they need opportunities to connect their goals with their values, strengths and sense of future self.

Conclusion

While it is still early to evaluate long-term impact, several positive outcomes have already emerged. Early feedback suggests that students value opportunities to engage with topics such as confidence, belonging and self-awareness, and tutors have reported that the coaching-informed framework provides a more coherent way of facilitating personal development conversations. At the same time, implementation has presented challenges, including ensuring consistent delivery across curriculum areas, encouraging engagement with self-directed resources and balancing developmental activity alongside competing academic priorities. These experiences have reinforced the importance of ongoing adaptation informed by student feedback and practitioner reflection.

This work is not presented as a finished model, meaning that a key strength is that it is framed as part of an ongoing journey involving reflection and student feedback. This matters because belonging cannot be designed in isolation from students’ lived experiences. The effectiveness of the curriculum will depend on how students and apprentices engage with it, how Progress Tutors contextualise it, and how evidence of impact is gathered over time. Future evaluation will therefore be important in understanding how the redesigned PD contributes to educational gains, belonging, confidence and progression.



Ultimately, redesigning HE PD through a coaching-informed approach offers a meaningful way to support students as whole people. It recognises that success in HE is not only about academic achievement, but also about confidence, connection, self-awareness, resilience and the ability to imagine and work towards a positive future. By embedding coaching principles across induction, belonging, wellbeing, values, community and achievement, the curriculum aims to support students and apprentices to feel seen, develop autonomy and build the inner resources needed to thrive. In doing so, it begins to demonstrate how PD can become a powerful vehicle for cultivating belonging and supporting students' academic, personal and professional journeys.

Looking ahead, the intention is to continue refining the curriculum through evaluation of student engagement, belonging, confidence and educational gains. Future developments may include expanding coaching-informed resources, strengthening the use of student voice in curriculum design and exploring opportunities to embed coaching approaches more widely across the student experience. Through ongoing evaluation and collaboration, the aim is to build a stronger evidence base for coaching-informed personal development and its contribution to student belonging, success and progression in higher education.

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