

Highly personalised coaching: a powerful component of researcher career development programme

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1. Introduction



The NIHR Mental Health Research Incubator GROW programme is designed to support post-PhD researchers at a key career junction: to help **them define and progress their professional goals** and to develop skills and **networks** that will help them to make a real difference through mental health and addictions research. Each year, GROW brings together a cohort of approximately 20 postdoctoral researchers from across the UK. The programme offers workshops, networking opportunities, interaction with senior academics and optional 1:1 coaching with a professional coach experienced in working with academic researchers.

1:1 coaching is an established development tool which is, to our knowledge, relatively under-used in the researcher community. This poster presents key findings from implementing and evaluating the coaching element of the first 4 GROW cohorts.

3. Key Findings

In the **overall programme survey**, coaching has been consistently highlighted as **one of the two most helpful programme elements** (together with peer networking) with overwhelmingly positive response. All participants who opted in to coaching say they would recommend it to others.

Number of participants who opted for coaching and responded to the **Coaching Evaluation Survey** is provided in the Table 1.

Most frequently discussed coaching topics and the impact of coaching discussions had are summarised below.

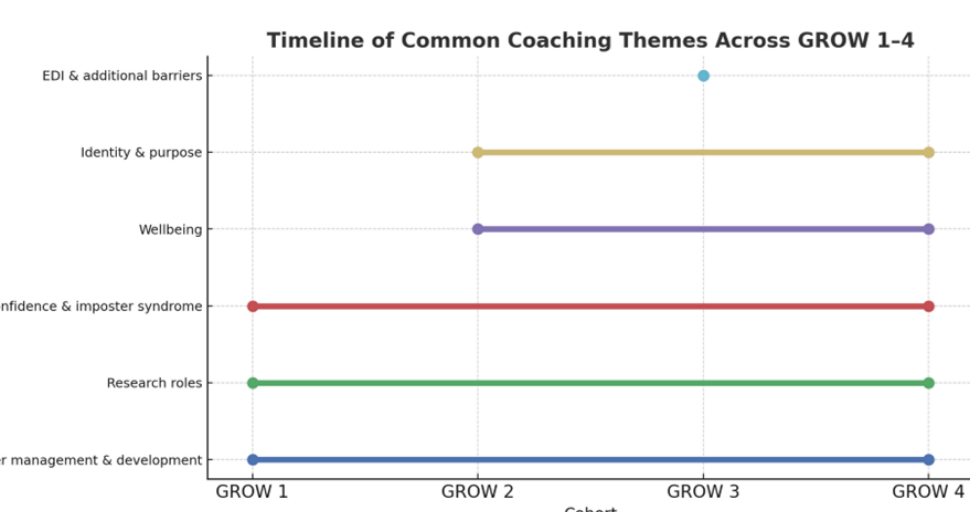
Table 1.

GROW Cohort	Total number of participants in the cohort	Number of participants who took up coaching (coaches)	Number of coaches who responded to evaluation survey (response rate %)
Cohort 1	19	18	14 (78 %)
Cohort 2	17	17	13 (77 %)
Cohort 3	20	20	17 (85 %)
Cohort 4	19	19	16 (84 %)

3.1 What do researchers bring to coaching:

- **Career management & development:** decisions on staying in academia or moving out, role transitions, promotions, self-promotion, and profile-raising.
- **Research roles:** time management, tackling procrastination, grant/paper writing, coping with rejection, leadership style.
- **Confidence & imposter syndrome:** common across all cohorts, often tied to career uncertainty.
- **Wellbeing:** increasingly prominent from Cohort 2 onward, with stress, burnout, job security, and work–life balance concerns.
- Identity & purpose: aligning career with personal needs, building visibility while staying authentic.
- **EDI & additional barriers** (noted especially in GROW 3): challenges for researchers with disabilities or from minority backgrounds, often with unpaid or under-recognised EDI responsibilities.

Timeline infographic shows when each of the six common coaching themes emerged and how their prominence shifted across GROW 1–4, it reflects challenges researchers face and also gradual changes in research environment and culture:



3.2 Cohort Differences

Grow 1: higher confidence, clarity of purpose, and drive (possibly because pilot participants had been waiting for such an opportunity)
Grow 2: less certainty and lower confidence; more explicit focus on wellbeing
Grow 3: increased awareness of systemic barriers; continued strong wellbeing focus; more anxiety about research paradigm recognition
Grow 4: five sessions instead of four; deeper topic exploration; continued strong emphasis on centring personal goals in demanding environments

4. Discussion and Recommendations

4.1 Factors Contributing to Positive Impact of Coaching

- Impartial, sector-aware qualified coach
- Dedicated time & space for reflection and strategic thinking
- Responsive, supportive interaction tailored to real-time challenges
- Researchers did not need to look for suitable coaches – coaching was embedded in the programme
- Researchers were open to working with a coach and highly engaged in the coaching process
- Coaching is 100% tailored to individual context, needs and working style
- Coaching promotes a rare reflective space within a high-pressured and competitive environment

Contact Details

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Oxford Development and Coaching designs and delivers workshops, programmes and 1 to 1 support for researchers.

2. Methodology

Coaching is introduced to the cohort participants early in the programme to introduce the coaching team and provide information about the coaching process and practicalities. Individual sessions are delivered online throughout programme duration (4 sessions in cohort 1-3; 5 sessions in cohort 4).

At the end of the coaching assignment, coaches send a short Coaching Evaluation Survey with 4 questions:

1. What has been the most important aspect of coaching for you?
2. What will you be bringing with you into your future work and life from the coaching?
3. What would you have liked me to do differently in how I worked with you as your coach?
4. Any there comments you would like to share?

Coaches then analyse the survey responses, reflect on coaching themes that occurred during sessions, and share high level, anonymised findings with the GROW Manager. Independently, the GROW Manager surveys participants about the whole programme. This anonymised overall programme survey is conducted in a manner similar to respondent blinded thematic analysis. The long form question responses are all printed out and read through; they provide insights about the programme including the coaching element.

3.3 Impact of Coaching

We assessed the impact of coaching through the following two questions:

1. What has been the most important aspect of coaching for you?
2. What will you be bringing with you into your future work and life from the coaching?

1. What has been the most important aspect of coaching for you?

- Dedicated, Protected Time to Reflect
- Safe, Supportive, and Independent Space, able to bring whole self
- External Perspective and Challenge
- Career Planning and Decision-Making
- Confidence Building and Personal Growth
- Practical Tools and Strategies, e.g. for delegation, stakeholder management, problem-solving

2. What will you be bringing with you into your future work and life from the coaching?

- Confidence and Self-Belief
- Strategic and Structured Planning to research and to career
- Time Management and Productivity
- Reflection and Self-Awareness
- Boundaries and Work-Life Balance
- Problem-Solving and Flexibility
- Practical Tools and Resources, e.g. to address live challenges or plan effectively
- Encouragement and External Validation

A number of researchers in each cohort have gone on to look into ways to **continue coaching** - either through departmental funds or being included in the budget in future grant applications.

Also of note is comments in the wider programme survey suggesting that some participants didn't think coaching would be helpful when they started but that they felt they were wrong and **highly valued** the experience.

"It was the most incredible process, to start from such a position of uncertainty and to develop so quickly some really clear goals. It was then possible to begin taking the steps I needed to achieve those goals. This meant developing confidence, identifying existing skills, and working through some of the barriers I had anticipated. I felt motivated and enthusiastic after every session which also helped move me forward quicker than I would have done otherwise."

"The coaching was a brilliant opportunity to have that time for one-to-one reflection but guided by a professional. Particularly useful as an ECR looking for professional development."

"The coaching sessions have made a significant impact in that I have much more focus on my next steps which will hopefully pave the way for some stable long term future changes. Absolutely recommend the coaching to be part of this excellent programme. They sit very well together."

"An incredibly useful process to spend time examining the internal thought processes that influence work."

"I suspect that if people don't recognise they need coaching, they might find it even more beneficial than those who actively pursue it."

4.2 Coaching Process & Delivery Insights

- **Initial contact method matters:** earlier introductions via GROW Coordinator, introductory session run by coaches and coaching 'alumni' sharing personal experience help to create interest and initial rapport
- **Session number:** four sessions felt short; five allowed a more relaxed pace and deeper work
- **Guidance needed:** some participants unsure what to expect or topics to bring; written guidance and reassurance about evolving goals recommended
- **Flexibility:** even when participants arrived without a topic, sessions still yielded impactful outcomes

4.3 Recommendations for successful inclusion of coaching as a career development programme / element of a programme for ECRs

- **Offer 5+ sessions** to allow for deeper engagement and flexibility
- **Provide clear pre-coaching guidance** on potential topics, evolving goals, and how to use sessions effectively
- **Consider selection implications** where participants have long-term job security and may struggle to identify pressing topics
- **Offer ongoing/alumni / follow-up coaching** where resources allow, especially tied to fellowships and applications
- **Enhance cross-cohort networking** and create shared resources addressing recurring themes (e.g. planning tools, network mapping)
- **Increase awareness of coaching** among research staff to encourage wider uptake

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