Evaluating the coaching element of the second Grow programme (2022-23)

1. Introduction

This report provides reflections on the coaching element of the Grow programme, from both participant and coach perspectives. Additional questions (see Annexe) were sent to each participant following completion of coaching with the aim of generating data to enrich the existing evaluation of the second GROW programme and also to give participants an opportunity to reflect on their coaching experience and further embed resulting learning.   In addition, we have provided our reflections and recommendations based on our experience as coaches on the programme. This summary report is intended to complement the findings related to coaching in the programme evaluation report.

2. Themes emerging from the coaching sessions

We identified the following main themes in coaching conversations:

- Career management and development
  - Staying in academia or moving out
  - Transitions into new jobs, roles, maternity leave
  - Navigating difficult conversations relating to promotions
  - Self-promotion and profile-raising
- Research role
  - Time management and organising work better
  - Dealing with procrastination
  - Writing grant applications and research papers
  - Coping with rejection and criticism
  - Finding my own way as a Principal Investigator
  - Management style and ethical leadership
- Confidence and imposter syndrome
- Coachees' own emotional and mental health struggles - and their awareness of this

3. Differences between Grow 1 and 2

At the start of Grow 1, coaches were introduced to their coaches by the course director, Emily Lloyd, who was herself a coach. The introductory e-mail included three questions: *What is your overall goal for the coaching? Where in particular would you like to focus?* And *Is there anything else you feel it would be helpful for me to know?* This meant that when coachees first heard from their coaches, they had already been introduced and were already considering their aims for coaching. For Grow 2, the coaches themselves made first contact with their coaches, and asked the same three questions. This change was made with the intention of simplifying the process and enabling coaching partnerships to start more promptly. However, in some cases it seems to have made it harder to build rapport in coaching relationships as coachees were less prepared to hear from coaches. At least two Grow 2 coachees asked for more guidance on how to approach coaching, so it may be that the introduction via Emily (in Grow 1) had both reassured coachees, enabling trust to be built more rapidly, and prepared them for the start of coaching.

Coaches noticed some differences in the two cohorts. Cohort 1 participants tended to be distinguished by exceptional drive, intellectual curiosity and clarity of purpose. Cohort 2 participants have tended to show less certainty about their direction and lower levels of

confidence. This accords with coaches' experience of running pilot programmes which start with a pilot: participants in a pilot are likely to have been waiting to participate for some time, so may be further developed in thinking about their careers and levels of self-efficacy. This suggest that future cohorts are likely to replicate the characteristics of cohort 2.

In both cohorts, a theme related to participant wellbeing was noted. In cohort 2, this was more pronounced, with participants speaking explicitly about the need to protect their wellbeing, manage stress and sharing previous experiences of burnout.

4. Impact of coaching

As identified in the main evaluation report, participants found the coaching to be 'impactful' and 'valuable' and would 'highly recommend' it, with many participants finding it among the most useful elements of the programme. Participants noticed benefits resulting from the coaching related to three key areas:

- Increased confidence: participants felt more 'empowered', 'valued' their own contribution more, were clearer on their own strengths.
- New approaches: participants found the coaching supported them to find their own management 'style', 'challenge beliefs', approach issues in a 'novel way', and use self-coaching to address challenges.
- Enhanced planning and prioritisation: participants felt they had space for 'strategic thinking', developing 'short and long term action plans', 'structured and intentional planning', and 'proactively planning to avoid bottlenecks', being 'more granular' in research planning and 'more structured' in academic writing.

Participants were extremely positive about the coaching and its benefits to their professional development and wellbeing. The main elements contributing to this effect were:

- The value of an impartial person to talk to, e.g. *having an independent coach who understands the sector.*
- Having dedicated space, time and structure, e.g. *spending time planning and really considering issues, rather than having time slip away on day-to-day work; [having] sessions planned responsively around events as they were happening with my imminent job choices - this helped me to think decisions through 'in real time'.*
- Support and encouragement, e.g. *[my coach] guided me to more positive ways of thinking and dealing with problems; encouraging and supporting me to address career related decisions head-on; her enthusiasm for my work was also really encouraging and helped me to believe in my abilities; ...I appreciated the sessions at what has been a really challenging time outside of work.*

5. Recommendations for future Grow programmes

Based on our experience as coaches on the programme and the feedback from participants in relation to the coaching element, we recommend the following for consideration in future programmes subject to available funding:

Ideas to improve/enhance the present structure

- Reflections on start times and pre-coaching communication (see 3 above): in particular 'what do coachees need to know, from whom, when?'

- Longer term follow up for cohorts 1 and 2: the emphasis placed by coaches on the value of cohort interactions suggest that there might be benefits from widening the network across cohorts; as well as increasing and refreshing the networks, this could include some useful consideration of (and data-gathering on) what participants do after the end of the programme.
- Consider offering five coaching sessions rather than four to each participant: participants have consistently reported that they would value additional sessions, and six sessions is a common programme of coaching.

Ideas for additional offerings

Any of the below could be offered to future and/or past cohorts: including past cohorts has the potential to enhance (and evidence) the overall longer-term impact of the programme.

- Deliver an online session, or other input, on designing personal development plans (e.g. for research fellowship and grant proposals)
- Offer an optional 5th stand alone coaching session to focus on creating a personal professional development plan to sustain learning from the programme (possibly incorporating an element of 'How to design a development plan for your application/proposal')
- Create a shared space for resource-sharing. This could include recommended reading and tools from participants, and templates and tools from the coaching team to address key themes, e.g. prioritisation and planning.
- Create a bank of resources based on common themes from the coaching such as Voice, impact and presence, or Network mapping
- Deliver an online or f2f session on coaching skills for researchers to use in their roles
- Facilitate action learning sets for participants to work through live challenges with fears

6. Coaching for researchers – wider learning from the GROW programme

Evaluations from both cohorts have demonstrated coaching as an excellent fit for early career researchers, and that coaching has significant positive impact for this group.

"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."

It was noted that very few of the participants had previous experience or awareness of coaching. Research staff are unlikely to identify coaching as a development option without further work to increase awareness of coaching and its potential benefits. The Grow programme itself is a great example of coaching for research staff and it would be interesting to explore opportunities to raise the profile of coaching and support increased take-up of coaching for the benefit of individual researchers, their teams and the research community.

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Annexe A

Evaluation 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? (e.g. more / less / start / stop etc.)

4. Any other comments you would like to share (optional):

5. May we quote you anonymously in the evaluation report? Y / N