

Is peer coaching an effective way to help university students with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) engage with their studies?

Reflections on a new ADHD psychoeducational programme offered at UWE Bristol.

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## Abstract

This article explores the effectiveness of a psychoeducational coaching program, including a peer coaching component, designed to support university students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) at UWE Bristol. The challenges faced by students with ADHD in the academic environment are well-documented, contributing to lower academic performance and increased stress levels. Traditional interventions, such as medication and psychotherapy, may not be universally accessible or sufficient, prompting the need for alternative approaches. The article details a practical example of peer coaching implemented during a session focused on initiating writing tasks. The coaching groups adhere to specific rules, encouraging active listening and avoiding prescriptive advice. Participants engage in reflective discussions, sharing their writing experiences and exploring habits, ultimately fostering a supportive and non-judgmental environment.

## Introduction

University students with ADHD face multiple challenges in their academic environment, such as increased academic demands, reduced structure and supervision, greater need for self-regulation and time management, and more distractions and temptations. (Sedgwick-Müller et al., 2022). These challenges can result in lower grades, higher dropout rates, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of stress and anxiety among university students with ADHD compared to their peers without ADHD. (DuPaul et al., 2021)

To support university students with ADHD there are interventions involving medication, psychotherapy, academic accommodations, peer mentoring, and self-

help strategies(Kooij *et al.*, 2019). However, these interventions may not be sufficient or accessible for all students with ADHD during their time in university, for example there is a significant wait time for identification and access to medication.(*Adult ADHD and higher education: improving the student experience*, 2022)

## What do students want?

Well, they are noticeably clear about that, students have reported to us they want:

- *To be more proactive, less procrastination*
- *Stop feeling overwhelmed*
- *To work smarter, feel calmer*
- *Understand what I am supposed to be doing with assignments*
- *Get better marks*
- *To move forward instead of burying my face in the sand*

## How do we address what they want through coaching approaches?

One promising intervention that has emerged in recent years is psychoeducational coaching for university students with ADHD. Psychoeducational coaching is a collaborative process that involves a coach (a trained professional or a peer) who provides individualised guidance, feedback, strategies and accountability to a student with ADHD in order to help them achieve their personal and academic goals (Swartz, Prevatt and Proctor, 2005; Parker and Boutelle, 2009). Psychoeducational coaching typically incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), motivational interviewing (MI), solution-focused therapy (SFT), and positive psychology (PP), as well as educational strategies such as study skills training, organisational skills training.

It aims to enhance the knowledge, skills, and strategies of individuals with ADHD to cope with their symptoms and improve functioning. Typically, it involves providing information about ADHD, teaching cognitive-behavioural techniques to manage attention, time, and emotions, and facilitating goal-setting and action-planning. Psychoeducational coaching is shown to be effective in improving self-efficacy, self-regulation, and academic outcomes among university students with ADHD. (Kooij *et al.*, 2019; Fullen *et al.*, 2020; SASC, 2021).

Peer coaching, a further strand of this UWE approach, is reported as beneficial for ADHD students. Peer coaches may interact with their fellows either one-to-one or in small groups by continuing classroom discussions, sharing study skills, evaluating one another's work, resolving specific problems, and encouraging independent

learning (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). Evidence suggests a group approach fosters an environment of mutual support, feedback, and reinforcement. (Field *et al.*, 2013; Parker *et al.*, 2015).

As Hirvikoski *et al.*, (2017) notes, it allows the opportunity to share experiences with people in a similar life situation of equal status. In a review of the value of peer learning for nursing undergraduates, Stone, Cooper and Cant, (2013) surveyed a variety of models. They suggest that peer learning may be more successful when peers are close in experience as it provides a more relaxed, less intimidating, and more "user friendly" learning experience. This is important for students with ADHD, who can feel isolated if not connected to students with a similar profile or who are having similar experiences.

- *It was useful being around others who struggle with the same things as me*
- *Thank you for running these - Useful to meet other people with similar challenges, makes me feel part of a community.*
  - Feedback from students at UWE

## Structure of the programme

The UWE ADHD psychoeducational programme runs over five weeks as one and a half hour sessions, for groups of between ten and twenty students and facilitated by two practitioners. Students from our database with an ADHD diagnosis, or who have been screened for indicators of ADHD, were invited to attend. Each week has a theme (figure 1) with the programme objectives and approaches threaded throughout the five sessions. Each session was structured into directed introduction of theory, peer coaching and discussion opportunities and then strength identification and strategy development.



Figure 1 UWE ADHD Psychoeducational programme

The programme objectives are to:

- Reflect on understanding and acceptance of their ADHD profile.
- Identify, value and use personal resources and strengths.
- Develop effective skills and strategies for the study and work placement environment.
- Evaluate accommodations/reasonable adjustments and self-advocacy strategies for different settings.
- Understand the impact of lifestyle choices on behaviour.
- Experience peer support and acceptance.

So how did we use peer coaching in practice? A speedy approach to peer coaching!

One example from the programme of the peer coaching approach can be seen in week two, *Get your writing started*. We wanted to keep the session as practical and engaging as possible, being mindful of not overloading the session with theory and

knowledge, so a formal coaching model was not explicitly used here. However, the sense of being a critical friend (Parker and Boutelle, 2009), one who talks less, listens more, and does not offer advice, was introduced using short, catchy instruction.

Each coaching group was given these two rules:

No, **me too** statements

No, **why don't you?** questions

Then given four questions:

1. How do you normally get started on a writing task?
2. What are your habits when you have a writing task to complete?
3. How useful are those habits?
4. How are you feeling whilst doing your writing task?

Each student was offered the chance to be the coachee, another student acted as scribe to record their writing story (their responses to the four questions), this was then gifted to the coachee to reflect on further.

### What have I and the students learned through this approach?

Although the students often wanted the 'quick win, top tips' approach to changing their situation, it was observed that spending time reflecting on their behaviours with a like-minded peer group gave fresh insights and understanding of how their thoughts, feelings, and actions were contributing to their experiences of getting started with their academic work.

- *Discussing behaviours around getting started was also very helpful. Thank you :0)*
- *Really useful. Have managed to hand in two assignments as a result of attending sessions. Feedback from UWE students*

Strong emotions were shared around a writing task, which was often echoed by the rest of the group. This allowed the students to see they were not alone and reduced the shame and stigma attached to their sense of self as a learner (Mueller *et al.*, 2012; Masuch *et al.*, 2019).

- *I felt it was an expectation to know how to write for all university students but coming straight from sixth form (and not knowing I have ADHD) I didn't know how and felt very isolated from my peers. Feedback from UWE students*

As a facilitator it can feel daunting to lead on a peer coaching approach such as this, it can seem easier to offer advice or strategies, but it is a privilege to witness a student's reflections on their academic journey, to see them 'move forward instead of burying my face in the sand.'

Who am I/what do I do?

I am Kelly Goodfellow, Senior Neurodiversity Practitioner, in the [Access and Learning Strategies](#) team in the library, UWE (University of the West of England). Our team support students, who identify as neurodiverse, in addressing barriers to their learning and to reach their potential. We have recently been offering an ADHD psychoeducational peer coaching programme to students, including a session on how to get your writing started.

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