

Book review

Coaching and Mentoring for Academic Development by Guccione, K. and Hutchinson, S.

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As many other publications (Boynton, 2020; Fleming, 2021; Grant, 2021) are reflecting the higher education (HE) sector is facing an unprecedented set of challenges which are proving deeply unsettling to all levels of staff, students and other stakeholders. Guccione and Hutchinson's book, *Coaching and Mentoring for Academic Development*, is a timely contribution to recognising, navigating and tackling this disconcerting environment through mentoring and coaching. Their approach is to introduce coaching and mentoring as ways of connecting and developing the requisite skills, knowledge and understanding to support and develop those involved in the HE sector and build more inclusive learning cultures. In this way, the book seeks to support those across the Universities sector charged with staff development responsibilities, however, there is also an underlying narrative that suggests all academics and administrators, whatever their career stage, can benefit from coaching and mentoring. The authors' extensive contextual knowledge and expertise mean they reference and apply coaching and mentoring ideas and practices to the myriad of priorities concerning those with these responsibilities in Universities in wholly engaging ways.

The book is arranged into three main sections where the first section focuses upon the challenges of people development within the Universities sector and what coaching and mentoring can contribute. The second section concentrates on the models, tools and techniques deployed by those practising as coaches and mentors. There are suggested exercises to assist practitioners and those designing interventions too. The final section adopts a more organisational or institutional perspective, and considers the value, reputation and political dimensions of delivering and developing coaching and mentoring in the HEI sector. The thirty-three chapters are spread relatively consistently across the three sections and make for accessible, concise and informative sections on key topics. The book is well-written though there are some grammatical and spelling anomalies which might have been addressed through more careful copy-editing.

What I have really enjoyed and benefited from this book is the depth of Guccione and Hutchinson's nuanced knowledge of the sector. As an academic, I prefer reading well-referenced arguments, and *Coaching and Mentoring for Academic Development* does draw on relevant sources though not in a laboured and contrived way evident in some books. Instead, what stands out for me is the ability of the authors to demonstrate their deep and nuanced understanding of the peccadillos and peculiarities of the sector without suggesting coaching and mentoring can be panacea to all its ills. They also recognise the heterogeneous nature of the wider sector, and how within institutions themselves, very different responses and levels of engagement with coaching and mentoring, are evident. This really is testament to their extensive expertise and experience in coaching, mentoring and more broadly, academic development. For me this also means all readers can recognise something about the opportunities and snags coaching and mentoring may present for different departments, participants and stakeholders. Guccione and Hutchinson thoughtfully prepare the reader for the downsides as well as the gains of coaching and mentoring, essentially advocating a 'long game' strategy and the building of skills and allies to garner support for mentoring and coaching. As such the micro, meso and macro levels of coaching and mentoring practice, programmes and strategies are contemplated so readers can reflect one where they themselves, their departments or institutions may best leverage benefits of engaging in coaching and mentoring.

One frustration is the lack of attention paid to the potential value of acquiring qualifications or accreditation for mentoring, coaching and supervision as part of the keen practitioners' development. This seems in some ways to conform to the authors' own critique of Universities as places where development, in particular academic development, is potentially only relevant in service to the subject, discipline or area of service. I likewise wondered whether there was an opportunity for some kind of route map for how and where specific coaching and mentoring skills, knowledge and programme strategy might evolve over the careers of University staff. This would not be prescriptive but act as a potential guide for reflection and engagement of readers in terms of developing their coaching and mentoring expertise and skills. My final critique and it is one that the authors, themselves recognise, is that there is an overwhelming proclivity towards mentoring rather than coaching. I felt dispirited at times that coaching was in some ways overlooked and perhaps more could be made of the arguments and tensions around coaching and mentoring being 'two sides of the same coin' (Stokes et al., 2021 p. 142) and how the features and increasingly neo-liberal ethos of the HE sector shape agency and resonate with this equivocality.

My own penchants aside, I feel this is an invaluable book for those in the Universities sector. I have found myself returning to chapters as part of my own practice, as a coach, mentor, and programme designer and lead. I feel it offers incredible and important value where academic development, and broader support and nurturing connections have been side-lined. Indeed the ramifications of the C-19 pandemic, the increasing precarity of academic work and sustained pressures for teaching, research and knowledge exchange performance indicators reinforce its value. The importance of equipping ourselves with the skills and knowledge to be able to support each other, and humanise development in academia through coaching and mentoring has never been more relevant in the University sector. Guccione and Hutchinson have provided an invaluable book for advancing the conversation about coaching and mentoring in relation to our personal, institutional and wider social development.

References

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