

Designing the Curriculum for Proactive Resilience in Higher Education: Students' Experience of a University Student Success Coaching (SSC) Programme

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Abstract

Higher education has experienced a concerning rise in attrition and non-progression rates and increasing and complex well-being issues among students. One strategy employed to address these challenges is providing coaching services that support and promote student resilience. This paper reports on the University of Galway's experience developing the Student Success Coaching (SSC) programme dedicated to its undergraduate students. Rooted in the principles of Design Thinking, SSC encourages students to reflect on their strengths, challenges, and personal development pathways within their academic journey, and beyond. Feedback was gathered from students who participated in SSC through focus groups as part of an ongoing evaluation strategy. This paper highlights how SSC exemplifies how resilience can be framed as a dynamic, forward-moving process about overcoming adversity and cultivating the skills to face current and future challenges. Coaching can support this proactive form of resilience, enabling students to reclaim their agency and approach their academic and personal lives more confidently.

Keywords: Resilience; coaching; agency; design thinking.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the design of a co-curricular university coaching programme, SSC, and explores whether participating in academic activities such as coaching would similarly give higher education students the capacity to face challenges and difficulties and reframe them, not only to recover from hardships but also as a starting place and learning opportunity to design their lives meaningfully. Furthermore, the SSC aimed to put coaching at the heart of students'

learning, as an enhancement to the formal university curriculum, and potentially augment its impact in terms of positive outcomes in developing students' holistic learning and growth in higher education. This paper examines how the SSC programme supports undergraduate students in cultivating resilience across their educational, professional, and personal lives at the University of Galway. The focus is on the dimensions of holistic change, proactive resilience, and agency through self-reflection that the SSC underscores, making it an impactful and transformative approach.

Academic coaching has been linked to fostering student resilience by providing proactive support for mental health challenges and managing stress, burnout, and crises (Bellman et al., 2015). Coaching enhances students' ability to navigate challenges effectively by integrating strategies such as stress management and promoting academic and personal resilience (McFarlane, 2023). However, academic coaching has theoretical and empirical limits despite its benefits. Studies show coaching is perceived as a formal self-development framework lacking personal connection. Passmore (2010) suggests that students often regard coaching as a commercialized approach, overly centred on self-promotion and generic narratives of success. Another critical challenge in coaching lies in reimagining its purpose; instead of framing coaching narrowly on problem-solving as a static approach that treats issues as obstacles to be fixed—toward embracing it as a dynamic process that unlocks students' potential and nurtures meaningful growth (Grant, 2013). Resilience aligns with this broader vision of coaching when it is not framed as the missing factor leading students to struggle with university demands but is recognized as a holistic preparation for navigating the challenges of academic, personal, and professional life. Furthermore, within this coaching programme, resilience is framed as proactive, rather than reactive, the central idea being to embed coaching as an integral, formal part of students' curriculum, where they develop resilience (skills and tools) through the SSC programme and a related, for-credit module called Design Your Life (DYL), based on and linked to the Stanford University Life Design model (Hall et al., 2024).

Universities are asked to take more innovative approaches to coaching practices and their understanding of resilience for a more caring and inclusive university experience, which engages with and ameliorates the worrying numbers of mental health challenges and non-progression rates within higher education institutions. At the University of Galway, the SSC programme exemplifies an alternative vision of academic coaching for resilience. Grounded in design thinking principles, it aligns with engagement theories to foster resilience and "academic buoyancy," (Martin and Marsh. 2009). Which emphasizes constructive re-engagement after setbacks through interpersonal resources like peer engagement and intrapersonal resources like self-efficacy and autonomy. Drawing on Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) concept of "families of coping," SSC integrates strategies like problem-solving and support-seeking to underpin students' well-being and manage stress, contributing to their progressive development, acknowledging that challenges and failures are an inevitable and important part of life.

2. Methods

2.1 Context and goals of SSC

The University of Galway has established SSC as a cornerstone of its innovative educational initiative, Designing Futures (DF). This large educational programme, funded by the Irish Government through the Human Capital Initiative (€7.57m, 2020-2025) prepares students to deal with today's complexity and uncertainty and the future world of work. The wider DF programme in which the SSC is situated focuses predominantly on developing student entrepreneurship, through student engagement with an innovation hub, the IdeasLab, and by introducing students to innovative learning in research-based modules and transdisciplinary curriculum where they get to work with faculty and peers from across academic disciplines. Acknowledging that higher education is about the full, rounded education of the person, the SSC programme and related DYL module form the core personal development of DF, where students are afforded reflective space, time and supports to identify their interests and talents. SSC is an innovative programme that encourages students to learn more about themselves, gain clarity on their goals, and decide on actions to achieve them through fostering a supportive space for students. Students can participate in coaching through one-on-one or small group sessions tailored to their unique needs. SSC encourages and supports students to take an active, intentional role in 'designing their lives' to achieve their unique academic, personal, and life goals. The coaching process involves techniques and strategies with a proven impact on an individual's resilience. Three coaches work with students to identify and develop key resilience-building skills, such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, optimism, gratitude, and effective coping mechanisms. Techniques like reframing, goal setting, energy mapping and stress management are integral to the process.

Coaching offers nonjudgmental support for students to determine their professional and life goals and encourages new perspectives and mindsets to achieve them. This creates a space where students can have honest conversations, identify barriers to success, and develop a personal action plan. SSC supports students in taking an active, intentional role in 'designing their lives' to achieve their unique academic, personal, and life goals. Students can collaborate with a coach 1:1 or in a group session to work on several goals such as the following:

- Recognise strengths and natural talents and gain insight about what they innately do best. Assessments can be used to support this.
- Navigate successful transition into university life and community.
- Increase confidence and motivation to maximise their goals, talents, interests, and curiosities.
- Make decisions about educational and professional goals to make the most of their potential.

- Build their network and explore co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities e.g. societies, clubs, peer learning, which can complement and support their degree.
- Connect more closely with fellow students and their university community.

2.2 Key Activities and Workshops

SSC is not an isolated activity, and is offered alongside an interactive, workshop-based module utilizing the Stanford University DYL framework, aimed at enhancing student engagement and personal development. In practice, the SSC activities encourage students to approach their academic and life challenges creatively and collaboratively through various activity tools and a community of peers and mentors where students work on issues through assigned readings, reflections, and in-class exercises. The project reflects the principles of design thinking not only in its one-to-one coaching sessions but also in its different workshops;

Odyssey Planning: In this workshop, students imagine the narratives of three possible futures (odyssey plans) that might be upheld over three years, considering elements of work, relationships, health, and play. The participant students unpacked the future career and life they would like to lead by designing three alternative life scenarios: (1) the one they believe they currently live; (2) what if Life 1 was not possible and a Plan B was needed; and (3) what if there were no constraints

Mapping your energy—how to Design more energy into our Lives: This workshop helps students recognize their energy levels over a typical day or week and identify strategies to create more balance and to make the most of their time.

Design Your University Journey: In this workshop, students explore what university means for them and what they want to get out of their time at University. It includes a discussion with fellow students and a chance to recognize what personal success means.

Understand your Strengths and Make them Work for you: This workshop helps students recognize and appreciate their natural strengths and talents. Students are supported in applying their strengths in their academic and personal lives.

E-learning modules: SSC offers two self-directed e-learning resources: Coach Yourself to Success and DYL. Students can access both resources online.

2.3 The difference between SSC and traditional coaching approaches

The main difference between SSC and traditional coaching is that SSC is embedded within the university curriculum as part of the DF programme and is not extracurricular like traditional coaching. In other words, it is not a separate support service but complements academic learning by being an intentional part of the student's educational journey. Additionally, traditional coaching may focus on goal setting or time management, but SSC emphasizes iterative,

reflective processes encouraging students to creatively and flexibly engage with uncertainty. SSC proactively supports personal growth, resilience, and self-awareness and is not a corrective reaction to student difficulties after they arise. Unlike traditional coaching, which may narrowly target performance issues or career guidance, it nurtures the whole student—emotionally, socially, and academically. SSC fosters a learning community through group sessions, workshops, and reflective exercises with peers. Traditional coaching often centres on individual sessions and does not necessarily integrate peer learning or collective reflection.

3. Results

Student feedback showed that unlike traditional coaching, which often focuses on recuperative resilience and problem-solving, SSC coaching promotes a more profound and transformative shift that engages with students' personalities and prepares them for future adversities. Students frequently reported that the coaching did not only address their day-to-day issues but encouraged proactive resilience through a proactive approach. The findings are supplemented by a description of some of the workshops from the coaching activities, which equipped students with tools to face future challenges with confidence and agency. Their experiences are summarized under three thematic areas below, with supporting quotes provided. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity.

3.1 Coaching as a holistic change

From the feedback of the participating students, we can see that the coaching had a holistic approach to resilience, which was focused on three levels: the first in dealing with their problems and difficulties at the university, the second in offering tools for their professional and academic development and the third is future-oriented with a focus on looking at the lessons learned from their present challenges as instrumental to future achievements. Specifically, SSC aimed to help students deal proactively with the challenges of their lives and the difficulties that they face as undergraduate students at the university, as Bronagh says:

“Because it is really helpful and, in a day, and age where counselling and other mental health services aren't available as easily. SSC is great to manage like smaller issues before they become too big.” (Bronagh)

Additionally, as the SSC is within the framework of DF, the goal is to support students in designing their possible futures through a personalized skills development pathway. Hence, the coaches organized one-to-one coaching sessions but also workshops where they actively observed the students' struggles and gave them corresponding tools to develop solutions. The practical benefits of SSC, such as goal setting and time management, were accompanied by a more profound transformative change and a focus on solutions rather than problems and offered a sense of empowerment and clarity. As Lucy explains, the coaching relationship supported her

to have a positive view of challenges as well as develop practical professional and academic skills:

“So, it's kind of like counselling, but not really, it's just more you go in and you can talk about your problems and there's somebody always there to listen and help you manage your tasks and go about it in a more productive way rather than trying to solve the mental health issue at hand. So, it's more what you can do now, a solution ... they will help you organize whatever you need, assignments, do you need help breaking them down. So, it's just more helps you breathe for a bit. I feel like just a bit of like a chill session to sort out what you can do.” (Lucy).

3.2 Conceptualizing Proactive Resilience

SSC participants underlined how the programme's tools fostered their sense of resilience in a proactive way. The Clifton Strengths assessment enabled them to identify and leverage their inherent talents as mechanisms for success. It enabled them to learn how to apply their strengths in their personal, academic, and future professional lives and to connect with colleagues who share their interests. For example, Bronagh described how the coaching process helped her recognize the importance of setting boundaries and prioritizing, key skills that contributed to her evolving sense of resilience:

It's not like counselling. That's how I described it to people. I was like, if you were struggling, but you don't feel comfortable, and I know the counselling waiting list can be really long. And even if you just need, like, help organizing your days, if you're just struggling, doing success coaching is a great option ... you learn so much about yourself, even the Clifton strength test that was the example I would always use.” (Bronagh)

The coaching also promoted the ability to proactively identify challenges and implement a structured plan to tackle them through skills of taking initiative and self-organization. As Adnan says:

Like right now I only have one exam, but I have like six assignments big ones, so we have to get them on track and they're all due like yesterday, today, two weeks, one week. So, like you know it takes planning and organization and everything.” (Adnan)

In this proactive way of looking at problems, the participating students are encouraged to focus on immediate, actionable solutions as a resilience method. As Lucy expressed:

It's not like therapy, it's like counselling, but a more chill environment.
It's not to focus on your problems but how to solve the task at hand."
(Lucy)

Students noted that the coaching revealed latent strengths and encouraged them to reframe challenges as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles to overcome. This perspective shift is a core component of SSC, which focuses on cultivating the skills necessary for students to face uncertainty and complexity confidently. This holistic approach empowers students to discover and recognise their resources and potential. In this way, resilience becomes a tool for forward movement that promotes personal and academic development.

This resonates with theoretical perspectives on agency and resilience as dynamic and relational processes rather than fixed traits (Ungar, 2011). Through the coaching relationship, students were encouraged to reclaim their sense of agency to confront challenges with renewed confidence and a clearer vision for the future. This aligns with a broader understanding of resilience as the ability to endure adversity and reimagine and expand one's possibilities in response to it (Luthar et al., 2000).

3.3 Cultivating Agency through Self-Reflection

The participating students appreciated how SSC's tools and structured exercises fostered their sense of agency. These exercises allowed them to identify their strengths and goals and to design their life academically and professionally in an active way. This process reflects the principles of reflective practice (Schön, 1983), which emphasize the importance of structured reflection in fostering self-awareness and intentional decision-making. For Bronagh, coaching helped her recognize her ability to set boundaries and prioritize effectively:

"It's good to let you know more about yourself and how to put boundaries in place and how to just understand more about yourself as well."
(Bronagh)

This realization aligns with Kahu and Nelson's (2018) conceptual framework for student engagement, which identifies a sense of control and autonomy as crucial factors in enhancing students' capacity to navigate complex educational demands. Similarly, Adnan noted how the sessions facilitated a clearer perspective on his daily routines and responsibilities, enhancing his confidence in taking control of his workload:

"This because I know I was in a place where I was bad until like actually came to the Coach and we started talking and organizing and planning how to move forward because last semester was different from this semester. Last semester, I was behind on assignments but this semester, just coming, talking to the Coach and just figuring out day by day, like today, I'm going

to get this done and fully done. And you can also then if I got overwhelmed, I came and sat down with the Coach just had a chat and it made it 10 times better for myself to go then and get all my work done." (Adnan)

4. Discussion

The findings from the evaluation of the SSC programme show a shift in how students conceptualize and experience resilience due to an alternative view of coaching. The coaching program, inspired by the Design Thinking approach, focuses on using empathy, problem-solving, brainstorming, prototyping concepts, and testing. This holistic approach potentially empowers students to discover and recognise their own resources and potential. This is advocated by Trowler et al. (2022), who suggest promoting a student's awareness of their individual coping strategies (problem solving/support seeking/escape) for the development of a sense of resilience. These findings align with the primary and general conceptual framework of Student Engagement, which grounds the project (O'Regan et al., 2023). SSC, as well as the other initiatives of DF, frame student engagement along multiple pathways and a dynamic, and active conceptualization of efforts to promote student outcomes. Hence, the adopted vision of coaching and resilience fits well with the project philosophy. Moreover, rather than viewing coaching to foster resilience to recover from adversity, participants framed resilience as a proactive, forward-looking quality facilitated by the personalized and reflective nature of the coaching sessions. This aligns with the multidimensional approach to resilience proposed by Luthar and Cicchetti (2000), which emphasizes resilience as an evolving process influenced by context and the support systems in place. Similarly, Holdsworth et al. (2017) identify resilience, as a capability underpinned by well-being, as key to students managing academic demands. One of the most notable aspects of the SSC programme was its ability to help students focus on solutions rather than problems and fostered their sense of agency. This affirmative shift is coherent with resilience as both the endurance and the ability to reimagine one's possibilities in the face of challenges. As Tomlinson (2017) argues we need more proactive approaches to enable students to identify and leverage their personal strengths. This helped students to set boundaries and prioritize their time effectively and gain a clearer understanding of how to manage their life commitments and workloads. Through these reflective exercises, students felt empowered to act with greater agency, resulting in both personal and academic growth. While resilience is often framed as a positive individual trait, we recognise the importance of a more critical stance. Encouraging students to become more resilient should not overshadow the need to question and address the structural and systemic challenges they face. The SSC programme considers that resilience understood only in individual psychological terms might not be a sufficient response — for example, in contexts where institutional barriers, discrimination, or systemic inequities are at play. The SSC aims to balance personal empowerment with a broader awareness of the social conditions that shape students' experiences.

5. Conclusion

There exists an unfortunate paradox in coaching services: the students participating in coaching sessions have already overcome their initial hesitation and insecurity about sharing their difficulties with a coach. While the very students who most need the coaching possibly avoid it, with a common misperception that coaching consists of repetitive motivational speeches or generalized advice, which can feel unhelpful. This hesitancy is usually due to a perception of coaching as "not meant for them." Contrary to this misconception is an image of coaching designed to support every student through personalized, tailored approaches. To address these challenges, the SSC reframed coaching as a flexible, student-centred process that adapts to everyone's unique needs. Coaching designed this way potentially enhances its relevance, reduces intimidation, and makes it more accessible and attractive to those who might otherwise hesitate to seek help. By fostering a more inclusive and personalized approach, the SSC experience suggests that we can ensure that coaching fulfils its potential to support every student effectively, promoting their proactive resilience. The SSC is a transformative approach to resilience-building in higher education. It supports students in managing their academic and personal challenges and developing a proactive mindset toward their futures. The programme encourages holistic growth through reflective practices, practical skill development, and a supportive environment that empowers students to take ownership of their journeys. Student feedback demonstrates that SSC goes beyond traditional problem-solving methods, fostering meaningful self-awareness, agency, and sustained resilience. Initiatives like SSC highlight the value of integrating personal development into university life, offering a caring and future-oriented model for student support in contemporary higher education.

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