



COACHING PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

The information in this document is based on Curtin University's mentoring program and the generic version of their program available on the Autism CRC website. (<https://www.autismcrc.com.au/knowledge-centre/reports/peer-mentoring-program-autistic-university-students>)

PURPOSE OF A COACHING PROGRAM

Coaching can help neurodiverse students thrive in the university setting. This program is designed to assist students with the transition from secondary to tertiary education. Navigating university life is challenging for all students. This is especially so for neurodiverse students, as they may lack certain social and life skills. Coaches can support and advise students to help them improve their academic and life skills. The purpose of this program is to help students achieve their goals and reach their full potential. A successful program will build the self-esteem of the students and give them the tools and resources to succeed in the university setting and set them up for future success.

Australian universities have a first-year attrition rate of 15 percent (Moodie & Pitman, 2017). A coaching program can be invaluable in helping to retain students. Students are more likely to remain if they are successful in making the transition from secondary school to university.

Coaching versus mentoring

The structure of a coaching program differs from that of a mentoring program. In a mentoring program, the mentee is in a similar position as the mentor once was. The mentor shares the wisdom and perspective of their experiences with the mentee. However, it is then up to the mentee to translate the mentor's experience into their circumstances, and this can often be difficult.

Coaching, in contrast, focuses on asking questions to help the students create a plan of action to achieve their goals. Coaches encourage and challenge the thinking of the students. A mix of coaching and mentoring is likely to yield the best results. The same person can act as both a coach and mentor.

As the program becomes more established, it would be ideal if the coaches were also neurodiverse. This would then provide an opportunity for mentoring, in addition to coaching.

HOW TO HAVE A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

For the program to be successful, there must be a clear commitment by senior university management to take the project forward and allocate resources and funding to properly set-up the program.

Resources required to run the program

There needs to be a dedicated supervisor who oversees the coaching program. This role could be a shared position between two people to provide better coverage.

Responsibilities of the program supervisor(s) include the following:

- Designing and establishing the structure of the program
- Promoting the program to potential coaches and students
- Devising and distributing coach and student application forms
- Assessing applications
- Matching coaches and students
- Running a training session for coaches
- Running an orientation session for students
- Running regular supervisory sessions for coaches
- Staying in frequent contact with the coaches and being available to them
- Email check to coach and student after the first meeting to confirm meetings are scheduled
- Reviewing weekly reports submitted by the coaches and students
- Serve as an advocate for students and be in consultation with faculty, staff, and parents when appropriate about each student's challenges and progress
- If possible, the supervisor should do a coaching session observation and evaluation of the coaches

It would of course be helpful to have additional support staff to share some of these responsibilities, depending on the workload of the supervisor.

Application process

To be considered, prospective coaches must do the following:

- Submit a resume
- Submit a statement of interest, if required by the university
- Undergo an interview
- Undergo training before the start of the program

Who are the coaches?

The coaches are ideally graduate students who have excelled in coursework such as occupational therapy, speech pathology, psychology, etc. or other disciplines being undertaken by the students. It is recommended that coaches have leadership or teaching experience and to have taken some psychology or counseling classes. It is always

desirable if coaches have had prior coaching/mentoring experience or have experience working with children or young adults with learning difficulties. Coaches and students should be matched by similar interests and/or coursework, if possible. If students are matched in this way, there may be an opportunity for additional, subject-specific mentoring, in addition to the coaching. As stated earlier, it would be ideal if the coaches were neurodiverse. This would allow the coaches to offer their perspective and guidance from experience.

Graduate students are suggested because they are less likely to share academic spaces with undergraduate students. If there is not a graduate program at the university, the coaches could be in year three to five of their undergraduate studies or be sourced from another university.

Desired skills of coaches

Certain skills are desirable in the coaches, including:

- Storytelling (to clearly and concisely relate their experiences)
- Active listening
- Providing clear advice
- Asking questions – especially open-ended questions.

Responsibilities of the coaches

- Coaches must attend a training session before the program commences. The length of this training session will depend on what each individual university decides is feasible and desirable.
- Coaches should ideally meet, in person, with their students for about one hour per week.
- Coaches will submit summary notes on key points covered in their meetings. The students will be made aware that the coach submits summary notes on the meetings to the program supervisor, but that it only contains very general information about the meeting. Coaches should be told to spend no more than 20-30 minutes on the notes.
- Other than indicated above and below, coaches should not reveal the content of their discussions to anyone.
- Coaches must attend formal sessions, preferably fortnightly, where they receive coaching advice. These sessions should ideally be for no longer than an hour. It is important that someone, most likely the program supervisor, is available to provide continuous support and feedback to the coaches. Coaches should feel comfortable to reach out to the program supervisor to receive this support.
- The coach also needs to sign a confidentiality agreement that they will not discuss anything about the students outside the program. However, each university needs to have a protocol in place in case the coach learns something of concern about the student that needs greater attention or potential intervention. Coaches are obligated to report health and safety issues to appropriate personnel.

Responsibilities of the students

- During the period when students can apply for the program, information sessions should be held to explain what the program is and how it works. Students must attend one of these information sessions.
- Via the program application form, students also need to provide some general information about themselves to help with the matching process.
- In addition, to hold the students accountable and to ensure their personal growth through the program, the students should submit notes after each meeting to both their coach and the program supervisor. These notes should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete and provide the opportunity for personal reflection.
- Students should notify their coach in advance if they have a conflict with the scheduled meeting time.
- Students should complete a survey review of the program upon completion. This will help ensure continuous improvement of the program.

Structure of the meetings

Ideally coaching meetings should follow a general structure and curriculum. Each session could focus predominately on a different life or academic skill. The coaches could be given a curriculum of possible skills to cover in each session. This could provide structure to the session and ensure the objectives of the program are met. However, it is also very important that the goal of each session is agreed upon by the coach and student. This will guarantee that the student is more engaged and is working on what is most pressing to them. Examples could be a life skill – such as effective communication, time management, or organization – or an academic skill – such as learning or study strategies.

The coach may initially ask the student to self-assess how competent they believe they are in the particular skill that is the subject of the session, perhaps on a 1-10 scale (with 1 being 'beginner' and 10 being 'expert'). The session may then centre around:

- What the student's goals are on each skill
- Where they currently are versus where they want to be in relation to their proficiency with that skill
- Generating a variety of options and alternatives to help get the student to where they want to be with their proficiency
- Choosing which option(s) to pursue

The coach could help the student create a plan to improve their skills. It is important to keep the students accountable for what they are working towards. Students should bring paper and pen to document what they are working on (intra-session reflections) and the coach should also take notes during the meeting, to enable follow-up. At the following sessions, the coach could discuss the progress the student has made towards achieving their goals. The student could then reassess their proficiency level on each skill at a later session.

The structure described above is the “GROW” Model. GROW stands for:

- **Goal** – where does the student want to end up and how will they know when the goal is reached?
- **Reality** – where is the student currently in relation to where they want to be?
- **Options** – what different ways can the student reach their goals?
- **Wrap-up** – which of the discussed options will the student pursue to reach their goals?

The coach should go through each phase of the model with the student for every session. The link below explains what the Grow Model is in more detail and includes example questions for each phase of the model.

<https://warwick.ac.uk/study/cll/courses/professionaldevelopment/wmcett/resources/practitionerarea/mentoring/planning/grow/>

Material for the meetings

It can be extremely helpful to have some relevant material / curricular to work through as part of the process – as this can add structure, the sense of achievement and help in the development of relevant skills in the participants.

Attachment 1 has an example supportive group workshop program – from Macquarie University’s Aspire Program. The purpose of the program is to give autistic students the support they need to develop their skills and meet personal and academic goals, while also providing students with strategies to ensure well-being.

Timeline

The coaching program should begin as early as possible in the academic year, i.e. soon after Orientation Week, and run for the duration of the semester. This will ensure that the students get off to a good start and have time to build a relationship with their coach before they get into the more intense periods of assignment submission and exam preparation. It may be necessary to end the program in the week before swot vac, so both the coaches and students have adequate time to prepare for their exams.

How to advertise the program

It is important to effectively advertise the coaching program. Neurodiverse students will often only disclose their situation and register with the university’s Disability/Accessibility Service if they see a clear benefit for themselves – which is very understandable. Hence the importance of promoting the program.

One option is for universities to create a dedicated webpage for the program. An example is the link below to Curtin University’s peer mentoring program webpage. <https://students.curtin.edu.au/experience/mentoring/autism-related-conditions/>

The university may also consider promoting the program at Student Visitation Days or Open House events.

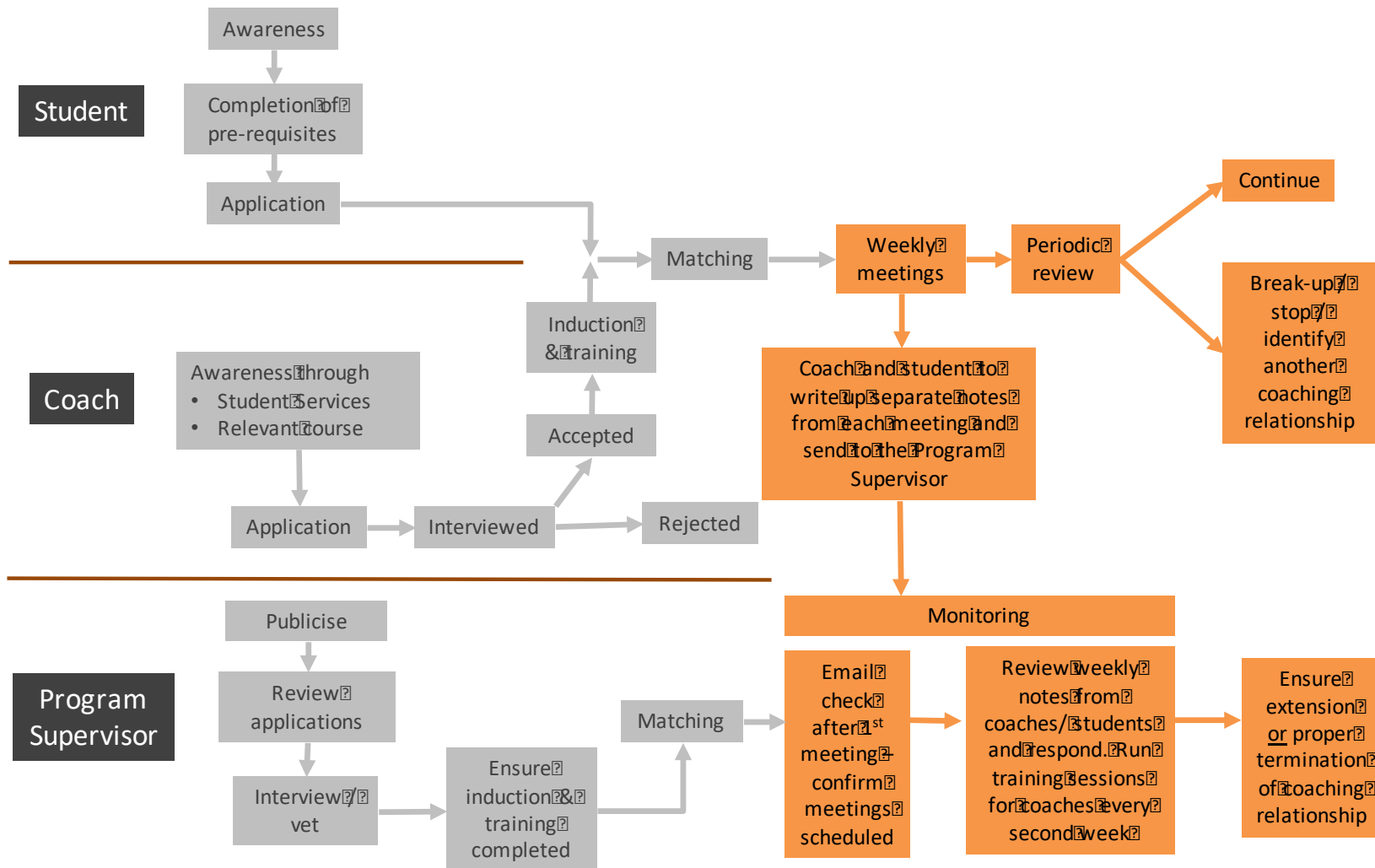
Another way to spread awareness of the program is for the university to send out an informational e-mail about it and post flyers around campus in both undergraduate and graduate spaces. Flyers should be posted in undergraduate spaces to find program participants and also in graduate spaces to promote the program to potential coaches. In addition, the academic programs that were mentioned above as being the ideal disciplines for coaches could send a targeted email to their students to find interested coaches. The university could also write a news piece about the program, send it to students by email / news feed and post the link on their website and social media pages.

Information about the program should also be included in the annual resources handbook for students. Consideration should be given for an informational event during O-Week. However, given the information saturation that occurs during O-week, it is also recommended that promotion of the program be repeated shortly after O-week.

Once the program has been running for a while, former participants – both coaches and students – could be ambassadors for the program and write testimonials – for the website and social media. This would help to spread knowledge about the program via example and word of mouth.

Overview of the coaching program

OUTLINE OF THE COACHING PROGRAM



COST OF RUNNING THE PROGRAM

Ideally, the coaches should be paid at a casual rate.

In Australia, there are opportunities to receive Federal funding to help cover some of the costs associated with this program. Corporate sponsorship could also be sought. There may be an opportunity for an employer partner of the Hub to sponsor a coaching program. The university should reach out to the Hub to learn more. The program could also just be part of the university's budget or an activity funded from the SSAF (Student Services and Amenities Fee). Whatever funds are allocated to the program will determine its size and what exactly is offered. If funding is not available, a program could still be established on a voluntary basis. In this case, the coaches would most likely be psychology students and would gain professional experience relevant to their field. If this is also not an option, then it could potentially be set up as a student club. Another option would be to create a support group of neurodiverse students that would come together and have a discussion, facilitated by someone from the Disability/Accessibility Support Unit. This could be as frequent as every week or just monthly, depending on how much time the faculty supervisor(s) could commit to the support group. This would be an opportunity for students to ask questions or work on different academic and/or life skills.

Time commitment for the coach would be about 1.5 to 2.5 hours per week per student. Ideally, there is no more than a two-to-one ratio of students to coaches. However, depending on willingness, capability and availability, a coach may have multiple students.

The coach and student meet 1 hour per week or fortnight and the coach would also need about 20-30 minutes to write-up notes after each meeting to send to the program supervisor. Every second week there would be a supervisory meeting for an hour, where the coaches receive coaching advice. Given this, it really is not too costly to support an individual student through such a program. In addition, the program supervisor position will likely be an additional accountability for someone who already works in the Disability/Accessibility Support Unit at the university.

Funding in Australia

The link below is to information regarding applying for Federal Grants in Australia.

<https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-disability-support-programme>

Alternative structure - Peer Support Program

We understand that it might not be feasible for some universities to implement a coaching program due to a lack of funding, staff, resources, etc.

An alternative to the proposed program is a peer support group. A peer support group requires significantly less funding and still provides students with resources and a support network, while also giving students the opportunity to meet one another and form relationships. Students would offer advice, guidance, and support to each other.

This type of support group has the potential to be very successful since the students would likely have similar experiences as one another and understand and be empathetic to each other's challenges.

The program could be run through the disability/ accessibility services unit or the counseling center. If possible, it would be ideal to have a staff member present to supervise the meetings, however, it is not necessary. The group should meet once a week or at least once every fortnight.

SUGGESTED PROGRAM RESOURCES

The link below is a comprehensive manual of how to run a peer mentoring program. While the modules are specific to mentoring, a lot of the trainings, structure, and templates can be applied to a coaching program. This is hosted on the Autism CRC website and is based on Curtin University's program – which was published in 2016. This should be reviewed by whoever is establishing or coordinating the coaching program. This material is available for use in establishing programs at other universities.

This material also includes further links to provide a more in-depth understanding of a coaching program, as well as presentation slides and templates. There is a module that is titled: "Mentor training presentations slides." This information would be useful for the coaches' training session. It includes autism awareness training, and traits and behaviors autistic students may display. The slides cover how autism may affect a student at university. The presentation also outlines the responsibilities of the mentors and tips to successfully communicate with and support students. Whilst this module is specific to mentoring, a lot of the information is general and could be applied to coaching.

There is another module titled: "Module forms, samples, and templates." Page 9 of this module includes a sample information form for the mentors, as well as what they need to do to apply for the position. Page 11 is an example reporting form the mentors would fill out after the session with their mentee. Page 15 is the contract for the mentor and mentee. The form outlines the responsibilities and expectations of each role. Page 16 of the module is a sample mentor confidentiality agreement. Page 26 is the sample information form that the students who want to be in the program need to complete. Page 33 is the mentee information release form, which allows the program supervisor to contact faculty and the student's parent/support person about the student. Page 34 is the mentee consent form. Page 38 is an example of a crisis response chart. Page 39 is a template of a safety plan the mentee can fill out. These resources may need to be adapted to the specific institution implementing the program, but they provide guidance for how to structure the program and the sample forms that could be used.

<https://www.autismcrc.com.au/knowledge-centre/reports/peer-mentoring-program-autistic-university-students>

A coaching program can really make a difference in improving a student's experience at university. A university should take the time to properly set up the program – because when done well, students can benefit greatly.

REFERENCES

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ATTACHMENT 1: EXAMPLE SUPPORTIVE PROGRAMS

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

Macquarie University's Aspire Program is a group workshop program designed to help autistic students adapt to university life and reach their full academic potential.

The purpose of the program is to give autistic students the support they need to develop their skills and meet personal and academic goals, while also providing students with strategies to ensure well-being.

The outline below is a brief overview of some of the modules in the Aspire Program and is included to provide examples of certain skills that neurodiverse students may struggle with. This outline is not exhaustive and is intended to point out potential skills to focus on in such a group workshop program.

Orientation

- Educate students about support services on campus, e.g. counseling, etc.
- Student well-being lifecycle
- Benefits and potential challenges of disclosure
- Study/ Life Balance

Semester Planning

- Benefits of time management
- Study/ Life Balance
 - Organising my time
 - Activity: Calculate time you should spend on study and time you spend on other activities
- Tips for good time management
 - Activity: Brainstorm a list of tips
- Make time visible
- Creating your semester planner and why a planner is useful
 - Activity: Create a semester planner, including due dates/ assessment dates, etc.

Weekly Planning

- Positive cycle of good time management/ benefits of time management
- Tips to managing time
 - Activity: Brainstorm tips
- Designing a study/ assignment schedule
- Types of planners
- Activity: Generate a "to do" list

Understanding the assessment task

- Assessment/ Assignment Process
 - Step by step approach to the assessment process
 - Group the steps into 3 areas: preparation, writing, and editing
- Approaching the assessment task
- Smart goals
 - Setting weekly targets and SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, timely)
 - Activity: Update your weekly planner

Working in Groups

- Types of groups at universities
- Personal strengths you bring to a group and challenges
 - Activity: List strengths and brainstorm strategies to overcome challenges

Procrastination and Planning for the mid-session break

- Activity: Identifying areas of procrastination
- Understanding why you procrastinate
 - Activity: Identify reasons you are procrastinating on a task
- Strategies to overcome procrastination
- Planning for the break
- Managing thoughts that go with procrastination
- Prioritising
 - Activity: Generate a list of the study related tasks you need to complete over break and generate a list of other important things to do over break
- Planning
 - Activity: Create your schedule for over break, e.g. work, appointments, meet-ups/ social outings
- Finding a balance between studying/work/chores and relaxing and having fun

Other Aspire topics

Other Aspire topics include: Academic Writing, Stress & Managing Change, Exam Revision Strategies, Exam Planning, Stress Management