

# Mladá veda

## Young Science

Špeciálne vydanie

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# A COACHING APPROACH TO SUPPORTING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SELF-REFLECTION AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

KOUČOVACÍ PRÍSTUP K PODPORE SEBAREFLEXIE VYSOKOŠKOLSKÝCH ŠTUDENTOV  
A FORMOVANIE ICH PROFESIJNEJ IDENTITY: NARATÍVNY PREHLAD

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## Abstract

This article presents a narrative review examining how a coaching approach may support self-reflection and the formation of professional identity among university students. It integrates perspectives from reflective practice, experiential and transformative learning, self-determination theory and communities of practice with research from higher and professional education. The literature reviewed most consistently associates coaching with self-awareness, self-regulation, autonomy, self-efficacy, goal clarification and the interpretation of practice-based experience. Its relationship with professional identity appears to be predominantly

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indirect: coaching may create conditions that facilitate the internalisation of professional values, strengthen a sense of belonging and encourage responsibility for one's own development. Direct evidence is concentrated primarily in medical and health professions education; findings from social work, teacher education and other disciplines are less extensive and should therefore be interpreted with caution. The literature is heterogeneous in terms of definitions, intervention designs and outcome measures, while professional identity is frequently assessed indirectly. Accordingly, the review does not claim the exhaustive coverage associated with a systematic review. It recommends integrating coaching with authentic practice, reflective seminars, portfolios and longitudinal support relationships, while maintaining psychological safety and clear boundaries between coaching, assessment, mentoring and therapy.

Key words: coaching approach, self-reflection, reflective practice, professional identity, higher education, student development

### **Abstrakt**

Článok prináša naratívny prehľad poznatkov o tom, ako môže koučovací prístup podporovať sebareflexiu a formovanie profesijnej identity vysokoškolských študentov. Prepája východiská reflektívnej praxe, skúsenostného a transformačného učenia, teórie sebadeterminácie a komunít praxe s výskumami z vysokoškolského a profesijného vzdelávania. Analyzovaná literatúra najčastejšie spája koučing so sebauvedomením, sebareguláciou, autonómiou, sebaúčinnosťou, objasňovaním cieľov a interpretáciou skúseností z praxe. Jeho vzťah k profesijnej identite sa javí prevažne ako nepriamy: koučing môže vytvárať podmienky na internalizáciu profesijných hodnôt, posilňovanie pocitu príslušnosti a preberanie zodpovednosti za vlastný rozvoj. Priame dôkazy sú sústredené najmä v medicínskom a zdravotníckom vzdelávaní; poznatky zo sociálnej práce, učiteľstva a ďalších odborov sú menej rozsiahle a vyžadujú opatrnú interpretáciu. Literatúra je heterogénna z hľadiska definícií, dizajnov intervencií a meraných ukazovateľov, pričom profesijná identita sa často hodnotí nepriamo. Prehľad si preto nenárokuje úplnosť systematického prehľadu. Odporúča sa prepájať koučing s autentickou praxou, reflektívnymi seminármi, portfóliami a dlhodobými podpornými vzťahmi pri zachovaní psychologického bezpečia a jasných hraníc voči hodnoteniu, mentoringu a terapii.

Kľúčové slová: koučovací prístup, sebareflexia, reflektívna prax, profesijná identita, vysokoškolské vzdelávanie, rozvoj študentov

### **Introduction**

Professionally oriented higher education is concerned with more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Students also learn to interpret experience, embrace professional values, manage uncertainty and gradually perceive themselves as members of a future professional community. Self-reflection and professional identity therefore constitute interrelated developmental processes. Reflection enables students to recognise the assumptions underlying their own actions and to carry learning from experience forward, whereas professional identity gives individual experiences meaning in relation to the professional role (Schön, 1983; Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024).

Within higher education, a coaching approach is used as a collaborative and predominantly non-directive form of support that draws on open questions, active listening,

goal setting, feedback and student responsibility. Systematic reviews associate coaching particularly with self-regulation, study strategies, career decision-making, self-efficacy and psychological well-being, while also highlighting inconsistent definitions and variation in the quality of interventions (Campbell and Mogashana, 2025; Fazel et al., 2025; Donaldson et al., 2025).

The relationship between coaching and professional identity has been investigated less directly. The largest body of evidence comes from medical and health professions education, where coaching is linked to longitudinal feedback, portfolios, clinical practice and a psychologically safe relationship with the coach (Parsons et al., 2020; Hauer et al., 2023; van Ede et al., 2023a). Although the transfer of these findings to social work, teacher education and other helping professions is theoretically informative, it should not be assumed to occur automatically.

The aim of this article is to use a narrative review to elucidate the mechanisms through which a coaching approach may support self-reflection and the formation of professional identity among university students. Particular attention is paid to distinguishing direct from indirect evidence, the conditions required for high-quality implementation, the methodological limitations of the available studies and potential applications in higher and professional education.

### **Methodology of the narrative review**

This article is a theoretical scholarly study based on a narrative review of the literature. Sources were selected purposively according to their thematic relevance to three areas: coaching in higher or professional education, self-reflection and reflective practice, and the formation of students' professional identity. Priority was given to peer-reviewed empirical and review studies focusing on university students, students in professional preparation and early-career professionals. Seminal theoretical works were included to frame reflective, experiential and social learning (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

The synthesis distinguished between direct evidence derived from student populations and indirect evidence from professional or coach education that illuminates mechanisms of reflection but does not demonstrate effects on university students. Publications were organised thematically according to mechanisms of action, intervention format, educational context and methodological limitations. As this was not a systematic review conducted under a preregistered protocol, the article does not report the number of records retrieved or provide a formal assessment of the strength of evidence; its conclusions should therefore be understood as a conceptual synthesis.

### **Theoretical foundations**

#### **The coaching approach in education**

In an educational context, a coaching approach may be defined as a collaborative dialogue in which a facilitator supports a student in clarifying goals, identifying resources and obstacles, interpreting experience and planning subsequent action. Its purpose is not to provide ready-made solutions but to develop the student's capacity to direct their own learning and assume appropriate responsibility for it (van der Baan et al., 2024).

Coaching overlaps with mentoring, tutoring and supervision, but is not synonymous with them. Mentoring relies more strongly on the experience and professional role modelling of a more experienced person; tutoring focuses on mastering specific subject matter; and supervision includes reflection on practice and professional standards. Coaching places greater emphasis on questioning, self-awareness, autonomous decision-making and the co-construction of goals (Irby, 2012; Toh et al., 2022). In practice, these roles may be combined; their purpose and boundaries should therefore be explained transparently to students.

Support for autonomy can be understood through self-determination theory. An environment that respects student choice, provides clear feedback and fosters a psychologically safe relationship may support autonomy, competence and relatedness. In coaching, these principles are reflected in students formulating their own goals, testing alternative courses of action and reflecting on their consequences rather than passively following instructions (Mylrea et al., 2019; van der Baan et al., 2024).

### **Self-reflection and reflective practice**

Self-reflection is the deliberate examination of one's own thinking, emotions, actions and assumptions in order to understand experience and adjust subsequent action. Reflective practice refers to the systematic integration of such examination before, during and after action. Schön (1983) distinguishes reflection-in-action from reflection-on-action; in professional preparation, this may be complemented by prospective reflection oriented towards future decision-making. Within experiential learning theory, reflection connects concrete experience with its conceptualisation and subsequent experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Transformative learning emphasises the critical examination of frames of meaning, particularly when students encounter uncertainty or a discrepancy between their own assumptions and professional reality (Mezirow, 1991). In higher education, reflection supports the integration of theory and practice, metacognition and responsibility for learning; however, its quality depends on task design, facilitation and the psychological safety of the learning environment (Fullana et al., 2016; Veine et al., 2020; Colomer et al., 2020; Colomer et al., 2021).

Not every written or dialogic activity leads to critical reflection. When reflection is perceived merely as an administrative requirement or as part of assessment, students may produce socially desirable accounts rather than engage in an authentic examination of experience. Longitudinal courses and facilitated group reflection appear to have greater potential when they repeatedly revisit specific situations and connect them with subsequent action (Désilets et al., 2021; Burla et al., 2024; van Oorschot et al., 2025).

### **Students' professional identity**

Professional identity is a dynamic understanding of who an individual is becoming within a profession, which values and norms they adopt, and how they integrate their personal self-concept with a professional role. It is not merely a set of competences but a gradual process of 'becoming a professional' that unfolds through experience, relationships, language and participation in professional practice (Wenger, 1998; Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024).

Higher education curricula influence identity through formal teaching, practice placements, role models, feedback and the processing of challenging situations. In medical

education, this process is frequently described as gradually learning to think, act and feel as a member of the profession (Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2021; Findyartini et al., 2022). In allied health disciplines, particularly important influences include learning environments, relationships with educators, supervisors and patients, and opportunities to discuss professional tensions (Lewis et al., 2023).

In social work and the helping professions, authentic experience, recognition by professionals, professional networks and the capacity to connect personal motivation with ethical and professional requirements play an important role. Research involving social work students and graduates highlights the significance of agency, supportive feedback and reflection on formative professional experiences (Gadot and Segev, 2024; Yao and Flynn, 2025).

### **Mechanisms linking coaching, reflection and identity**

Coaching does not influence professional identity as an isolated technique. Its potential contribution can be explained through a set of interconnected mechanisms: slowing down and structuring experience, supporting autonomy, providing a psychologically safe relationship, enabling social sharing, and connecting reflection with authentic practice. These mechanisms are complementary, and their significance depends on the format of the intervention, the educational context and the quality of the relationship.

### **Thematic synthesis of the evidence**

#### **Direct evidence from higher and professional education**

Reviews of coaching interventions in higher education report predominantly positive but heterogeneous outcomes. The most frequently examined outcomes include study strategies, self-regulation, self-efficacy, persistence, career decision-making and psychological well-being. However, differences in definitions of coaching, programme duration and outcome measures make comparison difficult and preclude a universal conclusion regarding effectiveness (Campbell and Mogashana, 2025; Fazel et al., 2025; Donaldson et al., 2025).

In a randomised study of career coaching for medical students, coaching reduced career decision-making stress and increased self-efficacy and confidence in career choice, but did not produce a general change in overall self-concept (Fris et al., 2025). Research on career coaching in higher education likewise found that coaches supported the development of employability competences primarily through experimentation, future orientation and self-reflection (van der Baan et al., 2024). These findings support the proposition that coaching operates through specific learning and decision-making processes rather than through a rapid, global transformation of identity.

When interpreting outcomes, it is important to distinguish academic success from deeper changes in identity. Improvements in planning, self-confidence or coping with demands may represent important preconditions for professional development, but do not in themselves demonstrate a change in professional identity.

### **Coaching, self-reflection and self-regulation**

The most direct connection between coaching and self-reflection arises in dialogue that suspends immediate advice-giving and encourages the student to describe a situation more

precisely, examine underlying assumptions and formulate alternatives. Reflective learning is strengthened when it is repeated, anchored in practice and complemented by formative feedback (Veine et al., 2020; Engelbertink et al., 2020).

In medical education, longitudinal programmes that combine coaching conversations with portfolios, clinical experience and planning for personal and professional development appear particularly valuable (van Ede et al., 2023a). In programmatic assessment, however, a tension may arise between supporting self-regulation and meeting formal assessment requirements. If students perceive the coach as an assessor, they may limit their openness and focus instead on meeting expected performance standards (Liu et al., 2025).

Some evidence concerning the quality of reflective dialogue comes from the education of sports coaches rather than from coaching interventions with university students. These studies highlight the value of collaborative reflection and digital tools; however, their findings provide only indirect support for the pedagogical mechanism and cannot be generalised directly to the professional identity of university students (Dixon et al., 2021; Stoszkowski et al., 2020).

### **Coaching and the formation of professional identity**

The most developed body of direct research comes from medical education. In this literature, coaching does not function as ‘identity instruction’ but as a supportive structure within which students interpret feedback, critical incidents, career decisions and tensions between their personal and professional selves (Parsons et al., 2020; Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2024).

Trust and longitudinal continuity repeatedly emerge as important conditions. Students and residents have reported that a sustained relationship with a coach enabled them to discuss uncertainty, integrate clinical, career and personal concerns, and observe their own development over time (Hauer et al., 2023; Hoang et al., 2024). Group coaching during the transition from study to professional practice supported the sharing of experience, adaptation to professional culture and career planning (de Lasson et al., 2016).

Reviews of medical education also emphasise that professional identity is shaped by the combined influence of the curriculum, workplace, role models, relationships and reflection. Coaching is therefore better understood as one of several supportive structures for professionalisation rather than as an independent cause of identity change (Toh et al., 2022; Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2021; Seth et al., 2025).

Outside medicine, the evidence is more dispersed. In social work, identity is associated with authentic practice, agency, professional networks and validation by professionals (Yao and Flynn, 2025). Research on transformative learning in social work education suggests that challenging experiences and their facilitated processing can connect personal and professional development (Damianakis et al., 2020). In health and allied disciplines, professional identity develops through learning environments, relationships and dialogue about professional challenges, although the extent of the evidence varies considerably across disciplines (Lewis et al., 2023).

### **Intervention formats and conditions for implementation**

A coaching approach may be delivered individually, in groups, through peer coaching, as part of a longitudinal academic programme, or digitally. Different formats support different

processes and entail distinct limitations; moreover, terminology is used inconsistently across the literature. Table 1 therefore summarises typical characteristics rather than fixed categories.

| Format                                    | Typical contribution                                                                                                                    | Main risk or limitation                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individual coaching                       | Personalised goal setting, career decision-making and confidential dialogue (Fris et al., 2025)                                         | Time-intensive and demanding in terms of coach preparation                                          |
| Longitudinal academic coaching            | Monitoring development and integrating feedback, portfolios and practice (Hauer et al., 2023; van Ede et al., 2023a)                    | Risk of formality or role conflict when the coach is also an assessor                               |
| Group coaching and facilitated reflection | Social support, normalisation of uncertainty and sharing of identity-related issues (de Lasson et al., 2016; van Oorschot et al., 2025) | Highly dependent on psychological safety and clear group norms                                      |
| Peer coaching                             | Mutual learning, mirroring of experience and accessibility                                                                              | Without facilitation, dialogue may drift into advice-giving or superficial reflection               |
| Online and digital formats                | Flexibility, accessibility and support for regular reflection (Wang et al., 2023; Stoszkowski et al., 2020)                             | Weaker relational quality, variation in digital readiness and limited evidence of long-term effects |

Table 1 – Formats of coaching interventions and their limitations

Source: authors' own synthesis based on the cited sources

### Methodological limitations of the available evidence

The research field is heterogeneous in its terminology, populations, interventions and outcomes. The term coaching may refer to brief support for study strategies, a career-focused conversation, a peer intervention, or a longitudinal programme of personal and professional development. Such variability limits the comparability of studies and makes it difficult to determine which programme components are decisive (Campbell and Mogashana, 2025; Fazel et al., 2025).

Professional identity is frequently identified as an intended outcome but is often measured indirectly through interviews, reflective writing, a sense of belonging or broader indicators of professional development. Qualitative data provide rich insight into the process, but findings are more difficult to compare across disciplines. Quantitative studies more often capture self-efficacy, autonomy or academic outcomes than professional identity itself (Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024; Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2024).

Longitudinal follow-up is found primarily in medical education, whereas other disciplines are characterised more often by smaller, context-specific or cross-sectional studies. Moreover, findings from postgraduate medical education cannot be transferred uncritically to undergraduate students in social work, teacher education or psychology.

| Methodological issue                 | Implication for interpretation                                    | Recommendation for future research                                                             |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Inconsistent definition of coaching  | It is unclear whether equivalent interventions are being compared | Describe the coach's role, frequency, content and relationship to assessment precisely         |
| Short follow-up periods              | Uncertainty regarding the durability of change                    | Include longitudinal measurement during study and after entry into professional practice       |
| Predominance of self-report measures | Risk of socially desirable responses                              | Combine self-report with observation, portfolios and multisource feedback                      |
| Indirect measurement of identity     | Limited comparability across studies                              | Define specific dimensions of identity and use validated or transparently justified measures   |
| Concentration in health professions  | Limited transferability to other disciplines                      | Conduct comparable studies in social work, teacher education, psychology and other professions |

Table 2 – Principal methodological limitations and recommendations

Source: authors' own synthesis based on the cited sources

## Discussion

The narrative synthesis suggests that the strongest and most direct relationship is between the coaching approach and processes of self-reflection, self-regulation and professional decision-making. A coaching conversation may create space to slow down, articulate experience more precisely and move from general self-evaluation towards a specific plan for further learning. This contribution is theoretically consistent with experiential and transformative learning (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991).

The relationship with professional identity is more complex. The available literature supports a predominantly indirect model in which coaching facilitates the interpretation of practice, clarification of values, autonomy, a sense of belonging and the processing of identity-related tensions. Professional identity should therefore not be understood as a rapid individual outcome of a single conversation. It develops over time and through interaction with the curriculum, workplace, role models and professional community (Wenger, 1998; Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024).

From a practical perspective, programmes that are longitudinal, connected with authentic practice and grounded in trust appear more promising. A non-assessing relationship is particularly important when addressing uncertainty, failure and professional self-concept. Complete separation of coaching from assessment may not be feasible in every institution; nevertheless, role boundaries must be explicit and information disclosed in coaching conversations must be appropriately protected (Parsons et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2025).

Findings from medical and health professions education provide useful models, but their transfer requires adaptation to the culture of the discipline. Social work, teacher education and other helping professions differ in their forms of practice, ethical dilemmas, relationship to supervision and processes of professional socialisation. In these disciplines, a coaching approach should complement rather than replace professional supervision, methodological guidance or psychological support.

## Implications for higher education practice

Coaching elements can be incorporated into reflective seminars, practice placements and portfolios. Particularly useful are questions that move students from describing an event towards examining its meaning: What assumptions did I make in this situation? Which professional values were in tension? How did my actions affect others? What do I need to verify or do differently next time? Such questions help connect experience with subsequent action without replacing professional explanation or feedback.

Educators and supervisors require preparation in active listening, open questioning, the purposeful use of silence, formative feedback and recognition of the boundaries of their own role; the importance of targeted preparation for educators who coach is also supported by experience from a longitudinal programme in biomedical education (van Ede et al., 2023b). A coaching conversation is not therapy, and where issues extend beyond the educational context there must be a clear referral pathway to appropriate professional support.

When designing a programme, it is advisable to specify its purpose, frequency, procedures for selecting and preparing coaches, relationship to assessment and rules of confidentiality. Evaluation should distinguish between immediate outcomes, such as

satisfaction and goal clarification, and longer-term outcomes, such as self-regulation, professional agency and identity.

### **Limitations of the review and recommendations for research**

This article is a narrative review and does not constitute a systematic or exhaustive mapping of the literature. Source selection was thematically oriented and may have favoured publications available in English and disciplines with a more developed evidence base. The conclusions therefore describe dominant mechanisms and patterns rather than the magnitude or statistical certainty of effects.

Future research should employ transparently described and comparable interventions, longer follow-up periods and data from multiple sources. Outcomes relating to self-reflection, self-regulation, self-efficacy and professional identity should be distinguished, and research should examine whether changes in the first three areas genuinely precede more enduring changes in identity. There is a particular shortage of studies in social work, teacher education, psychology and other helping professions.

Research should also compare coaching with mentoring, tutoring and supervision and examine which combinations of support are appropriate at different stages of study. In online and hybrid formats, evaluation should consider not only accessibility but also relationship quality, psychological safety and approaches to working with sensitive identity-related issues.

### **Conclusion**

A coaching approach may provide a useful framework for supporting university students' self-reflection and professional development. The most convincing evidence relates to self-awareness, self-regulation, autonomy, self-efficacy and career decision-making. Its contribution to professional identity appears to be predominantly indirect, operating through the interpretation of experience, clarification of professional values, a sense of belonging and the assumption of responsibility for one's own development.

High-quality implementation requires a sustained and trusting relationship, integration with authentic practice, appropriate preparation of coaches and clear boundaries between coaching, assessment, mentoring, supervision and therapy. Given the disciplinary imbalance and methodological heterogeneity of the available evidence, coaching should not be presented as a universally effective technique. It may, however, be understood as a pedagogical approach to organising reflection and professional learning whose contribution depends on context, relationship quality and integration within the curriculum.

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# **Mladá veda**

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