



Executive Function Coaching for University Students

What are executive functions?

The term 'executive functions' describes a set of skills thought to reside in the prefrontal cortex of the brain which help us to plan and organise our responses, behaviour and emotions. They include skills such as task initiation, time management, planning and organisation, shifting and task monitoring. They include many of the skills that underpin learning and enable children and adolescents to function with a reasonable degree of independence. Recent scientific studies have found that this part of the brain isn't fully developed until around 25 years of age and the development of these skills can be slower and more challenging for individuals with learning challenges such as ADHD and dyslexia.

Students who have executive function challenges often have trouble getting started on tasks, get distracted easily, lose belongings, struggle to know how to revise for exams, produce poorly structured essays and forget to hand in their work. They make careless mistakes, put off course work until the last minute, miss lectures, struggle to prioritise work over leisure time, and have no sense of time urgency. Often considered chronic underachievers, these students are at risk of not reaching their potential as well as experiencing poor mental health.

How can coaching help support executive function skills development?

Because of the malleable nature of the brain's neural-pathways, techniques to overcome executive function challenges can be learnt; one of the most effective and proven methods in strengthening executive function skills being coaching conducted by a well trained practitioner. Our coaching model was developed by educational psychologists in the US and is based on three assumptions:

1. Most people have an array of executive skills strengths and weaknesses.
2. Identifying weaknesses can help to devise strategies to overcome those weaknesses.
3. By repeated practicing a new skill, with the support of a skilled professional, anyone can develop and hone that skill so that it becomes second nature.

How useful can coaching be at University?

The transition to, and successful engagement with, university life requires an array of strong executive function skills many of which are new requirements for a young person and therefore take time and energy to develop. Some students are able to master these skills with ease whilst others struggle to make the transition, this can lead to poor academic performance, mental health challenges such as anxiety and may occasionally lead to students resitting a year or dropping out of their course all together. Support from a coach to help scaffold the development of these skills at this important time can help students to better meet the demands of their academic and social life, equipping them with essential life skills they can use beyond their time at University.

An Overview of the Coaching Process

What happens first?

The executive function coaching programme begins by collecting information from the adults who support the student and the student themselves (this will be carried out through a mixture of informal conversations and questionnaires).

Next comes getting the young person's commitment to coaching: it is important that the student is on board because we require the student to lead the process with the support of the coach. If this commitment is not assured we might instead suggest a course of 6 metacognition building sessions complete with a bespoke report and plan in the place of our standard appraisal followed by intensive coaching. This gives the student a chance to learn about executive functions and brain plasticity, understand more fully their challenges and how they can impact upon their lives and the lives of those around them and also encourages them to develop a growth mindset around improving their executive function skills. Towards the end of the six sessions we will ascertain if they are ready to engage with coaching and if they are, we will then set goals and create a bespoke coaching plan for them based on an intensity they are happy with.

If the student is fully committed to the coaching process we will start with an appraisal session; the session is about an hour and a half, but can be broken up over two sessions and can be conducted on Skype or face to face. The session involves the coach gathering background information from the young person about their executive function skills strengths and weaknesses, their interests and motivations, their long term goals and medium term goals and then identifying the obstacles to achieving them. Together the coach and the young person devise a realistic plan with strategies to reach their goals using **SMART** objectives. For example, a young person's goal could be increase lecture attendance within the next half of term or to improve their revision strategies before their prelim exams. The coach then produces a comprehensive report detailing the young person's executive function skills strengths and weaknesses and a bespoke plan of how to tackle these challenges, starting with the most pressing. This plan is shared with the parents, and we encourage students to discuss the findings and recommendations.

The coach will also take into account any reports that have already been produced (for example an educational assessment by a psychologist) and tailor the coaching according to the needs that have already been identified.

What does the coaching programme look like?

Working from the plan the intensive coaching sessions begin. The aim of these coaching sessions is to form good habits in terms of executive function skills; the exact content and format of the coaching depends on the bespoke plan and agreed objectives. The coaching sessions take place via online video chat and are usually between 15-20 minutes. The coach may also send reminders to the student via text. Once a week the coach and the young person have a longer session, which also involves going over a specific skill to support the young person to reach their goals. For example, a session could be based around writing an essay or health and wellbeing on a budget. Also, whilst our coaching programme is not therapeutic, sometimes we find that young people can develop unhelpful thought patterns about their executive function weaknesses; our coaches are trained to use tools to help

students identify and tackle these unhelpful thought patterns. In between sessions the coach might need to liaise with support staff and parents or remind the young person about an upcoming task. The coach and the student regularly review progress against their SMART goals.

The intensive coaching phase usually takes about 4-6 weeks, during this time the student and coach work very closely often making contact more than twice a day. This intensive period of coaching is the most crucial part of the process; it ingrains core habits that will form the basis of all coaching work on-going. After this initial phase the sessions are then three times a week, and then twice weekly, normally for a further 6-12 weeks. Typically, the sessions will then decrease to once a week for 8 weeks and then once a month for 7 months to ensure that the young person is continuing to reach their potential. Research and experience tells us that despite maybe seeming counter intuitive, the less intensive support further along in the process is as important as the initial intensive habit forming support. This is because maintaining new habits and skills can be challenging.

How do you determine how intensive the programme should be?

Each young person has different needs and will progress at different speeds, and we will adjust the plan to suit their needs and commitment to the process. Levels of intensity of coaching will vary according to the goals being worked on, what is happening in the student's life (i.e. preparation for exams) and their schedule. Changes in intensity will be agreed with the parents beforehand.

Example timetable of coaching and fee structure:

Session Type	Average Duration	Example of sessions	Fees – Ex VAT
Appraisal, Goal setting & Bespoke Report	One-off session	Parent Interview, review of questionnaires and other information, informal chat, goal setting and bespoke report and plan.	£230.00*
Metacognition Building, Goal setting & Report	6 weekly sessions (alternative to appraisal if student buy-in unclear)	6 x 1hr sessions & closing report: teaching about EFs, developing a growth mindset, setting goals	£660 for 6 sessions & report payable in advance
Daily Check-ins Mon-Sat	Weeks 1-6 N.B this could be 4 weeks depending on progress	5 sessions of 15-20 minutes + 1 session of 1 hour + 20 mins texts/calls/emails	£245.00 / week (This equates to £980 – Ex VAT for four weeks).
Three check-ins a week	Weeks 7-9	2 sessions of 15-20 minutes + 1 session of 1 hour + 15 mins texts/calls/emails	£215.00/ week (This equates to £860 – Ex VAT for four weeks).
Twice weekly Check-ins	Weeks 9-12	2 sessions of 15-20 minutes + 1 session of 1 hour + 15 mins texts/calls/emails	£176.00/ week (This equates to £704 – Ex VAT for four weeks).
Weekly Check-ins	Weeks 13-20	1 session of 1 hour + minimal texts/calls/emails	£92.00 /week (This equates to £428 – Ex VAT for four weeks).
Monthly Check-ins	Week 21 until when needed	1 session of 1 hour + minimal	£92.00 /month

*If you decide to not to go ahead with working with the coach that comes to carry out the appraisal, you will be charged for the full cost of the appraisal. However, if you decide to work with a different coach, you won't be charged for another evaluation, the new coach will work from the evaluation carried out already and you will be charged at the hourly rate of £92+ VAT for an initial meeting with the new coach.

For enquiries please get in touch with Victoria Bagnall: info@connectionsind.com

Website: www.connectionsind.com Email: info@connectionsind.com
Phone: 020 8050 1605