

DEVELOPMENT OF AN EXPERIMENTAL WEB PLATFORM FOR COACHING ACTIVITIES IN UNIVERSITIES

Elena-Ancuța SANTI¹, Gabriel GORGHIU², Mihai BÎZOI³

^{1,2} Teacher Training Department, Valahia University of Târgoviște

³ Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Electronics and Information Technology,
Valahia University of Târgoviște
ROMANIA

¹santi.anca@yahoo.ro, ²ggorghiu@gmail.com, ³mihaibizoi@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The classic educational process organized in universities becomes quite rigid in the current pandemic context, which claims especially online activities, with students who increasingly feel the need to be guided and helped. In this respect, the students have to be supported through tutoring and mentoring activities, dedicated mainly to 1st-year students with a high risk of dropout. The tutoring, coaching, and mentoring activities take time and the related effort for the tutor is quite high. On the other hand, the need to benefit from such activities is certain, requiring the identification of proper ways for students to have access to counseling activities, in which the effort of the counselors is not overwhelming. A viable environment would be the setting-up and the maintaining of a dedicated web platform, specially designed for such purposes. This platform facilitates coaching activities for a larger number of users, compared to face-to-face meetings. Also, the students can be counseled on topics that do not directly involve the educational process but are associated with it. This paper aims to summarize the current theoretical perspectives concerning online coaching in higher education, as a support strategy for students who experience difficulties, to prevent early school leaving, highlighting the characteristics and effective methodological approach related to this process.

Keywords: academic coaching, online coaching, web-platform, mentoring, counseling, open schooling project;

INTRODUCTION

Education represents a complex and dynamic process that reflects the rapid changes in the social, economic, cultural environment, which undergoes permanent transformations and adaptations in an attempt to form competent individuals, with harmoniously developed personalities, able to successfully face the challenges of the future.

In the actual society, education can no longer be conceived without the benefits offered by the integration of new technology into the didactic demarches. The pandemic generated unanticipated educational models and solutions, in a short time, teachers and specialists in education exploring multiple solutions for achieving the best results in the educational process, some of them becoming effective in the context of teaching and learning exclusively online. The analysis, design, and implementation of online learning

and related supporting tools are essential for any academic community focused on students' cognitive, social and emotional needs.

Among the most common problems encountered by students (mainly in the first year of study) - which can lead to demotivation, failure or even dropping out of school -, there can be mentioned: the difficulties of adaptation to the specificity of higher education, in terms of the pace of teaching-learning and information management (Sava et al., 2015), dissatisfaction related to motives and expectations, marginalization, emotional preparation and poor academic skills, inability to manage the workload, independent study and responsibility for one's own learning (Raftu, 2018), stress, anxiety, learning difficulties, problems concerning communication and relationships with colleagues, feelings of isolation, rejection, bullying and others; thus, the intervention of teachers (tutoring, mentoring), but also the involvement of the older students (volunteering) or the existence of academic counseling services, represent solutions that can reduce or prevent multiple problems in universities. As an example, at "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, a counseling service was set up based on the involvement of teachers and volunteer students (<https://www.fssp.uaic.ro/studenti/anunturi/probleme-la-facultate-sau-acasa>).

In the face-to-face or online format, such support initiatives, carried out at the institutional level, may mediate the communication process between students or student-teachers, facilitating the transition from one educational context to another, with a high level of difficulty. Orientation, familiarization of students with the academic services, proper immersion in the university environment (organizational, administrative, library etc.) or in the educational activities (teaching, learning, assessment, methods and techniques of intellectual work specific to higher education, selection of courses etc.) require coherent institutional support (Sava et al., 2015).

A recommended solution is offered by a web platform for online coaching, as a tool that generates social impact, in order to develop a virtual community of students to help each other on topics with a high level of expertise, but also to share common problems and optimal solutions, to benefit from advice and guidelines from tutors, coaches or mentors.

The student's identity and status gradually crystallize when he/she feels that belongs to a learning community when each person is appreciated, valued, and in addition, the quality of interactions with others generates satisfaction, fulfillment, and self-esteem (Maher & Macallister, 2013).

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND RELATED LITERATURE

According to Cambridge Dictionary, coaching represents "*the job or activity of providing training for people or helping to prepare them for something*", even, in a general sense, the coaching describes "*the process used to transport people from where they are, to where they want to be*" (Hartnady, 2011, p.1). On the other hand, there are multiple definitions of the coaching concept. By example, the *Association for Coaching* states that coaching is "*a collaborative, solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and person growth of the coachee (client)*".

Although being associated with sports, in recent years, the area of coaching has covered various fields, so today we meet *life coaching, sports coaching, health coaching, financial coaching, and career coaching* (Team FME, 2013).

The roots of coaching can be found in antiquity, in Socrates' dialectic method of inquiry - *the Socratic method* (Palmer & Whybrow, 2018), while modern coaching appeared in the '70s, as a continuation of the ideas promoted by *the Human Potential Movement*.

The first work on coaching was directed by Timothy Gallwey (*The Inner Game of Tennis*) and summarizes the working principles of the sports coaches, as well as how those principles can be transferred from sports to other sectors of life, to facilitate the achieving of goals (International Mentoring Group, 2020).

The process of personal coaching is based on the principles of *positive psychology* and *humanistic psychology*, which start from the premise that people are inherently good and able to direct their lives towards self-fulfillment and creativity, driven by the tendency to self-fulfillment or self-realization (Ben-Yehuda, 2015).

The coaching process helps clients define and achieve their professional and personal goals faster and easier. Coaching differs from other types of counseling methods: it uses elements of management, counseling, monitoring, mentoring, psychology, and training programs. It involves working between coach and coachee for creating changes.

A. Opre (2020) argues that a coach fulfills the following roles:

- Facilitates the exploration of the client needs, motivations, skills, and cognitive abilities;
- Facilitates real, lasting, and positive changes;
- Observes, listens, questions;
- Uses questions to identify solutions;
- Supports and facilitates goal setting and evaluation;
- Encourages the commitment toward action;
- Maintains a positive, supportive climate based on unconditional acceptance.

In education, coaching was introduced about three decades ago, as a strategy/method that met the needs to shape the teacher-student relationship in a positive way, such as that between a trainer and his/her players (De Meulenaere, 2013 apud Opre (coord.), 2020).

In *Academic Coaching Manual* (Learning Assistance Tomas Rivera Center, 2016), *academic coaching* is defined as "*the one-on-one process of helping a student identify his or her study strengths and needs and assisting them in building general, transferrable skills for use throughout their academic career and beyond*". The coaches offer support to students concerning time management and the achievement of educational goals, based on an individualized action/intervention plan.

The concept of *academic coaching* refers to a proactive and receptive relationship between teachers and students, which aims to achieve visions, desires, or educational goals, for the achievement of success in learning. In this relationship, the teacher fulfills less the role of formal instruction and more the role of coach (Barkley, 2010). The foundation of academic coaching is represented by the attitudes and methods that teachers *take* from the models approached by coaches. Traditional practices are thus combined with elements of social assistance, developmental psychology, sports, educational psychology, and even neurosciences, for building an authentic connection between student and coach. Academic coaches need to understand the student's experiences and feelings, to provide the clearest guidance, the most appropriate strategies (individualized), and related methods to meet their needs. The main skills that a coach must have are oriented on communication, ability to

focus on goals, active listening, ability to ask meaningful questions, provide *non-judgmental* feedback, empathy, fine intuition.

Cormier & Hackney (1993 apud *Academic Coaching Manual*, 2016) resume the skills necessary for a good coach:

- self-awareness and understanding;
- good psychological health;
- open-mindedness;
- objectivity;
- competence;
- trustworthiness;
- interpersonal attractiveness.

In schools or universities, the coach role can be performed by teachers or even students, in certain situations, but also by school counselors (Snyder et al., 2015). In academic coaching, the person who performs coaching activities does not offer solutions to mental or emotional problems (Opre (coord.), 2020). Academic coaching starts from the following assumption: the levels of success and retention are reduced and could be improved through appropriate intervention and changes in the teaching style. The better a teacher knows his/her students, the better he/she can respond to their educational and academic needs. Academic coaching has demonstrated positive relationships with college students' academic engagement and performance (Martinez, 2015; Snyder et al., 2015). Student retention and lower early dropout rates are a common goal of policymakers and university teachers (Barkley, 2010).

The academic coaching can be organized face-to-face, but also in the online format. According to Stenbom (2015, p. 4), *online coaching* is “an inquiry-based learning activity where a person gets support on a specific subject from a more knowledgeable person, using the Internet”.

During the pandemic, online academic coaching was used in many educational institutions, through *online (web) platforms* specifically designed for this purpose, as a way to support students to overcome barriers related to learning performance, amplified by the pandemic context. Guetzoian (2021) presents - in an implementation guide for higher education -, suggestions related to who can serve as an academic coach, aspects concerning training and coaching topics, logistical considerations for the online environment, but also a series of recommendations for future research on online academic coaching. Lee et al. (2020) show that, following the application of an online coaching program, there have been significant improvements in the academic performance of students as beneficiaries, and an increasing number of individuals who proactively use the resources of the coaching program, with the view to optimize the learning process.

2. COACHING VERSUS MENTORING

In many contexts, *coaching* and *mentoring* are seen as similar processes, or as interchangeable concepts, because the border between both activities is not particular delimited, their value being obvious. According to Lofthouse et al. (2010), mentoring is “a structured, sustained process for supporting professional learners through significant career transitions”. At the same time, specialist coaching “is a structured, sustained process for enabling the development of a specific aspect of a professional learner’s practice”. The differences between those processes are synthesized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison between coaching and mentoring (Lofthouse et al., 2010)

Coaching	Mentoring
Coaching is usually focused on professional dialogue designed to aid the coachee in developing specific professional skills to enhance their teaching repertoire.	Mentoring usually takes place at significant career events, such as to support induction or taking on new professional roles.
For teachers, it often supports experimentation with new classroom strategies.	
Coaches are not normally in positions of line management concerning their coachee.	It has an element of „gatekeeping”, and the mentor is almost always someone more senior in the organization.
Coaching for enhancing teaching and learning is not normally explicitly linked to a career transition.	There is often an organizational motive for the process; for example, succession planning.
The focus of the coaching is usually selected by the coachee and the process provides opportunities for reflection and problem solving for both coach and coachee.	In some cases, there is a requirement that the mentor provides documentary evidence of the mentoring process and its outcomes; for an example demonstrating that the participant in mentoring has met certain competencies.

In the *Principles of Coaching. Coaching Skills* (2013), a distinction is made between *coach*, *trainer*, *mentor*, and *counselor*, and the activities subsumed to each role. It is also necessary to make a delimitation between coaching and counseling - processes that in many respects, are similar, but with particular aspects that distinguish them. Thus, in both cases, a person (coach or counselor) actively and empathetically listens to the client, involving one-to-one interaction, confidentiality, and meaningful conversations (Van Nieuwerburgh & Allaho, 2018). The role of the coach involves full support in setting the goals and plans for the future, while the counselor provides support in solving complex psychological problems that appeared in the (recent) past. So, one is focusing on the future, the other is focusing on the past.

3. COACHING PRINCIPLES

Coaching, as a process that follows the evolution of the individual and the activation of human potential, is constantly evolving and is expanding in more and more areas of life. Like any activity having a clear purpose, coaching involves a series of key principles that guide the entire process to achieve the expected results. Those principles have proved to be necessary and useful over time, intrinsically regulating the whole activity. In this respect, the coaching principles target three main directions (figure 1):

- coach’s role;
- coachee’s role;
- coaching environment.

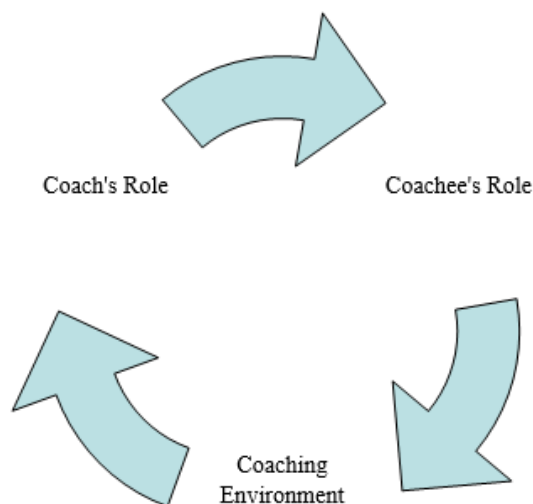


Figure 1. Directions targeted by the coaching principles
 (source: <http://fbia-academy.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/fme-coaching-skills-models-1-1.pdf>)

The coaching principles are summarized by Hemphill (2012) in Table 2.

Table 2. Principles of coaching (Hemphill, 2012)

Noble-Manhattan's Four Pillars of Coaching	John Whitmore's Nature of Coaching	Laura Whitworth's Four Cornerstones	Curly Martin's Coaching Defined
1. The coach is non-directional	1. Building the client's awareness	1. Client is naturally creative and whole	1. Should be focused entirely on results
2. The coach is non-judgmental	2. Building the client's responsibility (for their thoughts and actions)	2. Agenda comes from client	2. Involves resolving conflict between desires and values/beliefs
3. The client has the answer	3. Building the client's self-belief	3. Coach dances at the moment	3. About empowering the client to act
4. Involves intuition by the coach		4. Addresses the client's whole life	

According to *Principles of Coaching. Coaching Skills* (2013), for the coach is recommended to follow the following principles:

- Believe the coachee is capable;
- Non-judgmental attitude and behavior;
- Commit to ongoing support.

The role of the beneficiary (coachee) is oriented on setting his/her agenda and personal goals that he/she wants to achieve and related priorities; the coachee must also be actively engaged, and take responsibility for all the steps undertaken in the coaching process.

The principles related to the coaching environment are:

- Behave at all times as equals;
- Coachee is seen as a *whole person*;
- Relation is open, based on truth and trust.

Simmons et al. (2017) summarize the values that guide the academic coaching process in the format of recommendations:

- Encourage students to be self-reflective and to explore their strengths, skills, challenges, and goals;
- To believe that every student can succeed;
- Treat each student with respect and care;
- Help students increase their well-being and academic performance;
- Help students develop their basic academic skills;
- Assist students in planning the process of achieving goals;
- Develop students' confidence in their abilities (self-efficacy), to achieve academic success;
- Help students maintain the motivation needed to take the steps that lead to the targeted results.

4. METHODS AND TECHNIQUES FOR ONLINE ACADEMIC COACHING

As a general process, coaching is an approach that involves the following steps (Wasik, 1984 apud Opre (coord.), 2020):

- Problem identification - *What is the aspect I intend to change?*
- Goal Selection - *What do I want?*
- Generating alternatives - *What can I do?*
- Consequence analysis - *What could happen?*
- Decision making - *What is my decision?*
- Decision implementation
- Decision evaluation - *Did it work?*

The *Academic Coaching Manual* (2016) presents a series of coaching methods and techniques, structured on topics specific to client needs:

- successful general learning strategies;
- goal-setting strategies;
- strategies and techniques designed for improving concentration and memory;
- note-taking methods and strategies;
- stress and anxiety management;
- test and exams preparation strategies & study techniques;
- textbook reading methods & strategies;
- time management & procrastination;
- motivation development strategies.

In the coaching activity, one of the most known and used tools is represented by the *G.R.O.W. technique* (Whitmore, 2002), which means:

- *Goal* - the purpose of the session - short, medium or long term;
- *Reality* - the perspective on reality, current situation;
- *Options* - strategies and alternatives for action;
- *What* - what will be done, when, by whom, and with whom?

Opre et al. (2020) propose a *model* for setting the goals in coaching (Table 3).

Table 3. *Model for goals set in the coaching process (Opre et al., 2020)*

My objective is...	
What exactly do I want?	
Where and with whom do I want to achieve my goal?	
When do I want to fulfill it? What will be different after fulfilling it? How I will feel then?	
How will I realize that I have achieved my goal?	
What resources are needed to achieve the goal?	
Who can help me for achieving my goal?	
What have I learned from previous experiences that I can rely on and help?	
What were the resources I needed then (time, interpersonal relationships etc.)?	
What steps are needed for achieving my goal?	

5. DESIGNING THE FACILITIES AND BASIC FEATURES OF AN ONLINE COACHING PLATFORM

In order to facilitate the student’s access to academic coaching activities in the pandemic context (but not only), the setting-up of an online coaching platform appears as an opportune solution, having multiple advantages. Depending on the purpose for which the students request coaching sessions, the platform has to allow the selection of the area of interest, so that the student can be quickly directed to the topic or topics that are the object of his/her concerns (e.g. for discovering their learning style or how to learn effectively, how to take notes during the courses etc.).

The platform must be intuitive, easy to be used also by students who do not have highly developed digital skills or exploration skills. It must be attractive, stimulate the interest, curiosity, and satisfaction of the coachees. Another condition refers to the efficiency of the platform, and from this perspective, it must provide the main basic functions that mediate the coach-coachee connection:

- *before* the coaching session: scheduling the meeting, choosing a coach, selecting the issue for which the coaching session is requested, selecting the duration, choosing a meeting option (face-to-face or online) etc.;
- *during* the online coaching session: offering access to various resources, materials, facilitating the application of real-time methods, techniques, and tools (questionnaires, interviews etc.);
- *after* the coaching session: scheduling for the next meeting, providing feedback, recommendations, suggestions, useful links with other online platforms or resources, personalized post-test analysis, planning activities, individualized action/intervention plan etc.

In addition, the platform must allow the facilitating of communication in groups, with other students (community, sharing opinions, ideas, forum), the access to various information resources or various announcements etc.

The platform must be secure, must guarantee data protection and confidentiality of the whole approach so that students can trust in a professional and correct approach, for his/her benefit.

In order to have a coaching approach with positive results, the conditions related to the setting-up of the platform, high-quality standards must be met, respecting the specific principles of the coaching activity and the norms of ethics and academic professional deontology. At the same time, the coaches must be carefully selected, based on the criteria of competence and responsible assumption of specific roles.

CONCLUSION

The advantages of a coaching approach in universities derive from the fact that the entire process is focused on the person: the student and his/her needs, through building a secure and trustful relationship, in which the personal development can occur naturally and in a positive climate, characterized by sincerity, unconditional acceptance, congruence, empathy (Opre et al., 2020).

Recent studies on the effectiveness of coaching in higher education, as additional support and strategy to improve engagement and academic performance (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010), show benefits in terms of student retention and school dropout prevention, but also at the level of the process of management and control of scientific knowledge. Academic coaching allows students to manage their learning process, through effective planning, achievement, and feedback provided by the coach, when the coach's questions require reflection and active discussion (Webberman, 2011).

The academic coaching - even organized in an online format - is connected to how teachers can proactively build healthy working relationships with students and, at the same time, student-volunteers, who can also take the role of the coach, and can share authentic values, attitudes, beliefs and important experiences to coachees. In this sense, a powerful basis is set to the creation of an academic community that generates performance, with students who become adaptable, autonomous, competent, confident, able to anticipate and solve problems. In addition, the process of online coaching is motivational and helps students to find and implement solutions, and more, to understand life and what is happening around us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work is funded through the Project “Școală deschisă incluzivă prin științe captivante și orientate spre viitor” (“*Inclusive Open School through Exciting and Future-Oriented Sciences*”), in the frame of the PN III - UEFISCDI (Program 3 - European and International Cooperation), ID: PN-III-P3-3.6-H2020-2020-0103.

REFERENCES

- [1] Barkley, A. (2010). “Academic Coaching” for Enhanced Learning, Higher Levels of Student Responsibility, and Greater Retention. In *2010 Annual Meeting*, July 25-27, 2010, Denver, Colorado (No. 61853). Agricultural and Applied Economics Association.
- [2] Ben-Yehuda, M. (2015). The Route to Success - Personal-Academic Coaching Program. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 209, 323-328.
- [3] Guetzoian, E. (2021). Utilizing Online Academic Coaching as an Added Value for International Student Support. In Herron, J.D., Douglas, T. (2021). *Strategies for Student Support During a Global Crisis*. DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7000-5.ch014
- [4] Hartnady, M. (2011). A Historiographical Analysis of Integral Coaching. A Research Report presented to The Graduate School of Business University of Cape Town. Retrieved from <https://centreforcoaching.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/A-Historiographical-Analysis-of-Integral-Coaching-2011-Mark-Hartnady.pdf>

- [5] Hemphill, P. (2012). *A History of Coaching. A Personal Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.horizonslifecoaching.co.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Article-5-A-History-of-Coaching1.pdf>
- [6] International Mentoring Group. (2020). *Definition of coaching in 2020. Who is the coach and how he works nowadays?* Retrieved from <https://mentoringgroup.com/what-is-coaching.html>
- [7] Learning Assistance Tomas Rivera Center. (2016). *Academic Coaching Manual*. University of Texas at San Antonio. Retrieved from <https://www.utsa.edu/trcss/asc/docs/acmanual/Academic%20Coaching%20Manual.pdf>
- [8] Lee, I.C.J., Koh, H., Lai, S.H., & Hwang, N.C. (2020). Academic coaching of medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Medical education*, 54(12). DOI: 10.1111/medu.14272
- [9] Lofthouse, R., Leat, D., & Towler, C. (2010). *Coaching for teaching and learning: a practical guide for schools*. UK: CfBT Education Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/cflat/files/coaching-for-teaching.pdf>
- [10] Maher, M., & Macallister, H. (2013). Retention and Attrition of Students in Higher Education: Challenges in Modern Times to What Works. *Higher Education Studies*, 3(2), 62-73.
- [11] Palmer, S., & Whybrow, A. (2018). *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A Guide for Practitioners*. Second Edition. Hove: Routledge.
- [12] Martinez, J.D.M. (2015). *Academic Coaching, Student Engagement, and Instructor Best Practices* (Doctoral Study). Walden University. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2319&context=dissertations>
- [13] Opre, A. (coord.). (2020). *Dezvoltare personală și coaching*. Ghid pentru Universități. București: Ministerul Educației și Cercetării, Unitatea de Management al Proiectelor cu Finanțare Externă. Retrieved from http://proiecte.pmu.ro/c/document_library/get_file?p_1_id=1321522&folderId=1323233&name=DLF-E-7074.pdf
- [14] Raftu, G. (2018). Identificarea cauzelor care influențează fenomenul de dezinsertie academică la studenții din cadrul Universității „Ovidius” din Constanța. Retrieved from http://consiliere.univ-ovidius.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Studiu-dezinsertie-academica_2018_UOC.pdf
- [15] Robinson, C., & Gahagan, J. (2010). In practice: Coaching students to academic success and engagement on campus. *About Campus*, 15, 26-29. DOI:10.1002/abc.20032
- [16] Sava, S., Bunoiu, M., Luchș, D., & Malița, L. (2015). Adaptarea studenților din anul I la viața academică. CERED Conference Volume, Iași, Retrieved from https://cered.ro/2015/volum-conferinta/03_W2_Sava_Bunoiu_Luchș_Malița_Adaptarea%20studentilor%20din%20anul%20I%20la%20viata%20academica.pdf
- [17] Simmons, J., Davis-DeLaria, A., Elder, E., & Peterson, K. (2017). *We are all Academic Coaches: Helping struggling students achieve success*. Boulder, University of Colorado. Retrieved from <https://sc.edu/nrc/presentation/annual/2017/handouts/CI-131%20We%20Are%20All%20Academic%20Coaches%20Helping%20Struggling%20Students%20Achieve%20Success.pdf>
- [18] Snyder, P.A., Hemmeter, M.L., & Fox, L. (2015). Supporting implementation of evidence-based practices through practice-based coaching. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 35(3), 133-143.
- [19] Stenbom, S. (2015). *Online coaching as a relationship of inquiry: Exploring one-to-one online education* (Doctoral Thesis). KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm: Sweden.
- [20] Team FME. (2013). *Principles of Coaching. Coaching Skills*. Retrieved from <http://fbia-academy.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/fme-coaching-skills-models-1-1.pdf>
- [21] Van Nieuwerburgh, C., & Allaho, R.Y. (2018). A brief history of coaching. In: *Coaching in Islamic Culture*. Retrieved from <https://www.pdf.net/assets/uploads/Coaching%20Islamic%20Culture%202017Chapter1.pdf>
- [22] Webberman, A. (2011). Academic coaching to promote student success: An interview with Carol Carter. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 35, 18-20.

- [23] Whitmore, J. (2002). *Coaching for Performance: Growing People, Performance and Purpose*. 3rd edition. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- [24] <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/>
- [25] <https://www.associationforcoaching.com/page/CoachingDefined>
- [26] <https://www.fssp.uaic.ro/studenti/anunturi/probleme-la-facultate-sau-acasa>