

Exploring Students' Perception Concerning Educational Coaching: Premises for the Design and Implementation of an Online Coaching Platform in Academia

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Abstract: Education is a field that evolves constantly in relation to the changes in the society and the needs of its beneficiaries, taking over and adapting functional models from other fields. The quality of education of today's generations has a direct impact on the future, as tomorrow's adults need to have strong key competences, but also transversal competences needed in a dynamic and competitive labour market. Thus, the knowledge society implies opening up the education system to other social sectors, exploiting the paradigm of student-centred education, harnessing technology and virtual environments to create authentic learning and training contexts. Within this framework, educational coaching can be a means through which the individual potential of the learner can be discovered and optimised, with multiple benefits in personal, academic and professional terms. In order to achieve academic success, students need to know themselves, set short-, medium- and long-term goals and objectives, develop skills and competences in autonomous learning, communication, self-motivation, creative and critical thinking, emotion management etc. Through coaching activities, students can benefit from academic support and help in the process of self-discovery and personal development, optimising personal potential, collaborating and creating educational communities that share common goals and values. Placing the teacher in the position of a coach, this can contribute to the development of a multifaceted perspective related to the role of the teacher in the contemporary school, as a student's partner in the process of his or her education. The present paper aims to explore students' perceptions concerning the need for coaching activities in their academic life and to identify the students' main needs and directions for optimizing actions and interventions.

Keywords: *academic coaching; coach; teachers; students; online coaching platform.*

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1. Introduction

In the current socio-educational context, which still bears the marks of the changes generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is necessary to rethink the way in which the school assumes and effectively carries out the instructional-educational process, in order to meet the training needs of future adults, but also the requirements of the labour market. Innovation in education is not just a desideratum, but a necessity. Modern education must be open to the realities of the globalised and technologized world, so that the educational model promoted is in line with the challenges and rapid changes in society. In the academic environment, the educational process aims to train specialists in complex areas of activity, who, in addition to solid professional skills, develop transversal competences, but also skills such as lifelong learning, creativity, critical thinking, adaptability, flexibility, resilience; in the context of student-centred education, the role of the teacher is changing, he becomes a facilitator of learning, a counsellor, a mentor, a motivating agent, a partner in the educational act. Academic learning should not be the only outcome of education - the formative dimension is equally important.

Although during the pandemic educational institutions, teachers, parents and even students made great efforts to minimise losses in terms of knowledge acquisition, skills, competences and skills training, there were underlined disadvantages of online education, related to the lack of authentic human communication and relationships (vertical and horizontal, teacher-student, student-student), which are extremely necessary elements in the process of crystallising students' personalities and defining their identity. Prolonged screen time contributes to behavioural problems (Rodideal & Marinescu, 2021), increased rates of anxiety, distress and depression (Azmi et al., 2022; Rodideal & Marinescu, 2021; Thandavaraj et al., 2021), poor relationships, school problems, poor academic performance, lack of motivation for learning, increased dropout rates etc., but also generate difficulties in managing emotions, affecting students' well-being and even academic performance (Rodideal & Marinescu, 2021; Gómez-García et al., 2022). The current generations of students, nicknamed "Generation Z" or "Digital Natives" (Mohr & Mohr, 2017) and postmodern educational paradigms, imply the need to individualize the teaching approach in relation to the specificities of the beneficiaries: choosing the optimal teaching methods, creating learning contexts as appropriate and relevant as possible, integrating the means of modern technology and responding to the cognitive, affective interests and training needs of students. In addition to

teaching activities, university teachers have at their disposal complementary ways of stimulating the students' individual potential and promoting their well-being, such as mentoring, counselling, tutoring, guidance and coaching. Academic coaching, although a relatively new concept introduced to the educational field (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012), aims to facilitate student learning, well-being and success (Deiorio et al., 2016; Robinson, 2015).

2. Theoretical background

Since its inception in the early 1980s (Brock, 2012), coaching represents an activity that has developed greatly in recent years, coming to be regarded as a profession in its own right (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Lane et al., 2010), as a model of practice and innovation or even as a *meta-profession* that incorporates features of older helping professions (Abravanel & Gavin, 2017), but also areas in which can be improved personal and professional performance (Hamlin et al., 2009). Coaching differs from other forms of client support such as therapy, counselling, consulting, training or mentoring (Grant, 2001; Hamlin et al., 2009).

The definitions attributed to this concept varied. *The International Coaching Federation* (ICF) defines coaching as partnering with clients in a creative and reflective process, inspiring clients and helping them to maximise their personal and professional potential (ICF Central Florida, n.d.). Hamlin et al. (2009) define coaching as a facilitative activity that enables individuals to improve their skills, as well as acquire new ones, to enhance performance and effectiveness in their profession, personal development and growth. *The Association for Coaching* (n.d.) presents coaching as a collaborative, systematic, solution-focused and results-oriented process for personal growth. Deiorio et al. (2016) state that through coaching activities, recipients can become more reflective, develop competencies and lifelong learning skills to optimise personal potential. Devine et al. (2013) and Campbell (2016) consider coaching as a powerful intervention tool for personal learning and change.

Based on the principles of positive psychology and humanistic psychology (Ben-Yehuda, 2015), which appreciate that people, in general, are ontologically good beings and capable of leading their lives towards self-fulfilment of personal potential or self-fulfilment, felt as higher needs (according to Maslow's Pyramid of Needs), the coaching process is the path towards deeper self-knowledge, towards a meaningful personal and professional life.

Introduced in education about three decades ago as a strategy to respond positively and shape the teacher-student relationship (Opre et al.,

2020), *academic coaching* can be considered today, a tool/method/approach with multiple benefits (Blackman, 2010; Devine et al., 2013; Hooker, 2014; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). It covers a wide range of interventions aimed at improving students' academic performances, activating the process of self-discovery and harnessing personal potential, developing important skills to make learning more effective, achieving success and their well-being.

Defining this concept, van Nieuwerburgh (2012) argues that academic coaching represents a process that involves *one-to-one* (coach-client) action aimed at improving specific learning skills and facilitating the development of the beneficiary through active listening, appropriate challenge and creation of a supportive climate. Devine et al. (2013) identify different coaching approaches that can be found in educational settings: behavioural coaching, solution-focused coaching, cognitive and cognitive-behavioural coaching, instructional coaching, executive coaching, peer coaching, positive organizational scholarship. The same authors describe the specifics of coaching activities according to the beneficiaries of this process in school settings: coaching for teachers, coaching for school leaders, coaching for students and for members of the educational community (Devine et al., 2013; Campbell, 2016).

According to Deiorio et al. (2016), in coaching, the coach and the coachee should work together to improve the performance of the coachee, helping on identifying needs, setting goals, establishing a plan to achieve the proposed goals, monitoring and reviewing the plan. Opre (2020) identifies several stages in the approach to solving a problem situation in coaching: Identifying the problem (*What is the proposed aspect of change?*), selecting the goal (*What do I want?*), identifying alternatives (*What can I do?*), anticipating the consequences (*What can happen?*), making the decision (*What is my decision?*), implementing the decision and evaluating the outcome (*Did it work?*). Grant (2001, p. 24) also proposes a model of self-regulation in coaching, as illustrated in figure 1.

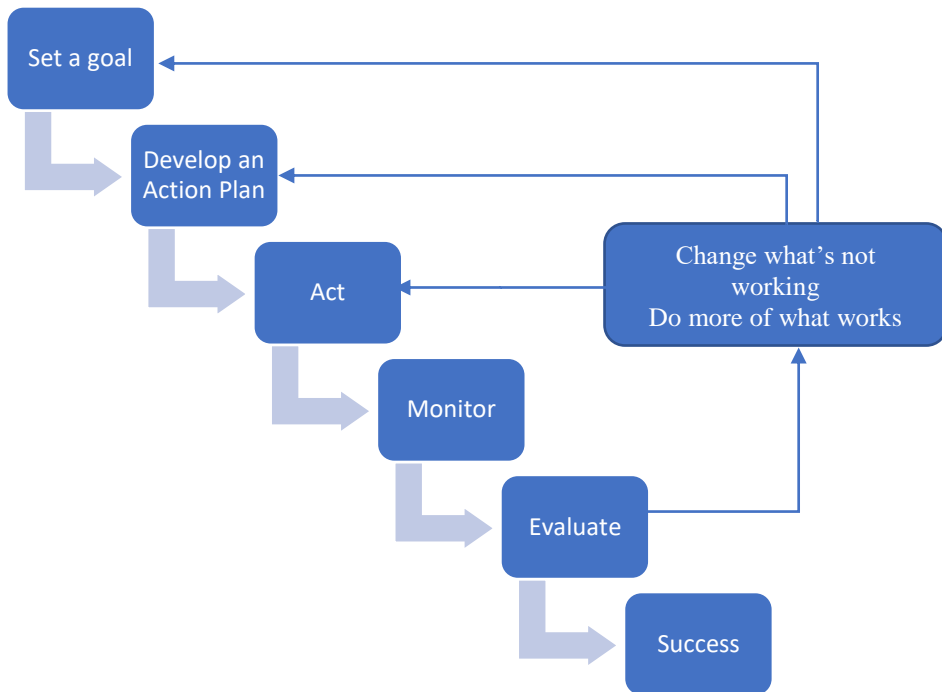


Fig. 1. A self-regulation model proposed in coaching activity (according to Grant, 2001)

Summarizing the views of several authors, Abravanel & Gavin (2017) argue that the purpose of the coaching intervention is twofold: to change the actions and behaviour of the individual (external dimension) or to change the client's attitudes (internal dimension). The authors also state that coaching activities can be mediated by technology (communication via web platforms, telephone, email, Skype etc.). Thus, the coaching process involves a holistic approach, which helps students in the process of self-discovery and exploration of internal resources, offering them support and ways to optimise or develop new competences necessary for effective adaptation. As a method and intervention tool, coaching can be used by any teacher to facilitate students' learning and personal development (Opre, 2020).

Among the fundamental principles of coaching, Andrews & Jones (2019) emphasize the importance of reflection; thus, the coachee must be engaged in a process of self-examination and, with the help of the coach, must be focused on goals, via being motivated to achieve them. The coach's role thus involves observation, active listening, encouragement, giving

support and real feedback, facilitating real and lasting change, creating and maintaining a positive, supportive, rewarding climate. This role can be fulfilled by teachers, school counsellors or even students in older years who wish to get involved in voluntary activities.

From a practical point of view, the coaching process is based on building a trusting and collaborative relationship between coach and coachee, a relationship built on mutual respect, aiming at gradually guiding the coachee towards achieving a goal relevant to the coachee (Deiorio et al., 2016; Opre, 2020). It should be an ethical relationship, based on respect for clear principles, with boundaries set to define acceptable behaviour, in which there is involvement or commitment. The same authors talk about credibility, expectations, interdependence and responsibility assumed by each partner in the coaching process.

The coaching approach focuses on the person, on student's needs, on building a secure and trusting relationship, in which development can occur naturally, also favoured by a positive climate based on unconditional acceptance, congruence, empathy (Opre, 2020). Regarding the coach's profile, Cormier & Hackney (1993) summarize several important characteristics, the effectiveness of coaching, depending on the coach's competences:

- Self-awareness and self-understanding, self-reflective capacity;
- Flexibility and open-mindedness, unbiased thinking;
- Objective empathy, in order to understand the students' problems, their relationships and to remain fair in dealing with them;
- Expertise, skills, knowledge and abilities related to the area in which the student requires support;
- Authenticity and congruence between thoughts, emotions, behaviours and ability to communicate them authentically;
- Interpersonal skills, adaptability, ability to assess the needs of the beneficiary, observation skills etc.

Although coaching is generally conceived as a process in which the coach works with a single beneficiary, there are references in the literature to *peer coaching* or *team and group coaching* (van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2019).

At the same time, globalisation and the development of technology have impacted all areas and identified opportunities to harness virtual space, so that coaching activities can be mediated by online platforms. Virtual meetings bring a number of advantages in relation to the time and space of the actors involved in coaching, so they are ideal options for many people.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was oriented on:

(1) expressing students' perception related to the importance of educational coaching activities conducted through the online platform developed at Valahia University of Targoviste;

(2) highlighting students' main self-perceived interests and needs related to learning, well-being, self-awareness and personal development;

Sample

The aim of the research was to find out students' opinions and general attitudes regarding the opportunity to develop online coaching platform. The sample included 76 students (from Valahia University Targoviste, Romania, first year of study), enrolled in the Teacher Training Program - level 1. Participating students were randomly selected from several faculties/ specializations.

Survey

In order to collect data, an online survey technique was used via the designed coaching platform, available at: <https://coach.ssai.valahia.ro>. Each student went through the necessary steps to register on the platform. They explored the platform, personalised their profile and familiarised themselves with the main functions and facilities offered by the platform. They were also informed about the protection of personal data, according to the national and international legislation.

The students filled in a questionnaire with 10 open and closed questions, available in the coaching platform. This was specially designed to capture their perceptions and their needs and interests regarding their own training and personal development. For the closed questions, the students were invited to rate their answers according to a 5-steps Likert scale - from "very much" to "not at all". In addition, the platform offers to students the possibility to answer to a series of self-awareness tests available on the platform, as Learning Style Identification Questionnaire, Self-Esteem Measurement Scale (Rosenberg), Emotional Maturity Scale - Friedmann, Intelligence Profile Questionnaire, Coaching Goal Setting Model. The results and interpretations of the completed self-assessment tests are received by each student via email.

4. Results and Discussion

Coaching is seen as a partnership with multiple benefits for students in developing their personal and professional potential (Jarosz, 2020). To be effective, the coaching process involves awareness of the need for self-awareness and personal development, as well as the responsible assumption by the beneficiary of the process of growth and evolution.

In this respect, in order to identify the extent to which the first-year students are concerned about their own development, one of the questions asked respondents to assign a response according to the perceived importance. Thus, as illustrated in figure 2, students are most concerned with the process by which they can optimise their overall potential. More, there were no respondents who stated that they were only slightly or not at all concerned about their own development.

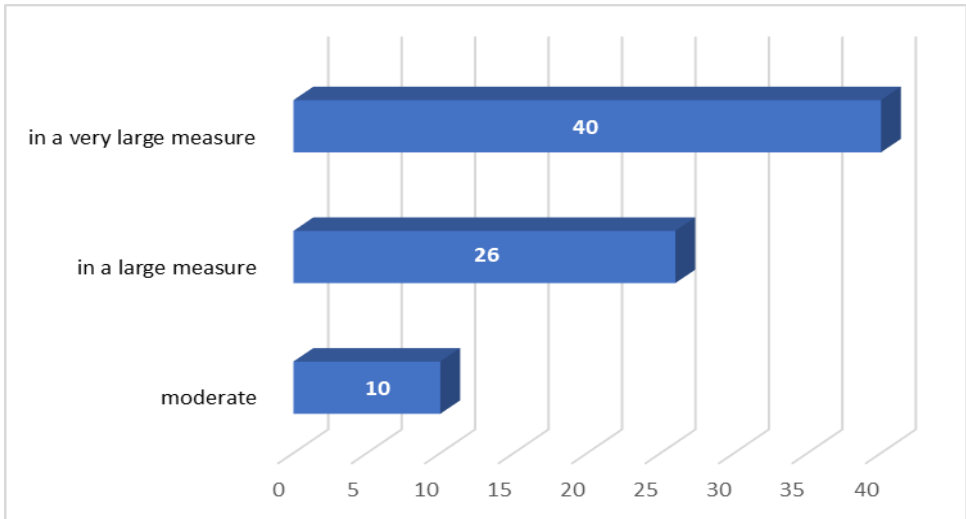


Fig. 2. To what extent students appreciate their interest regarding their personal development

Source: Authors' own conception

Another question sought to identify the students' perceptions to the extent to which self-awareness and personal development are facilitating conditions for achieving academic success. Figure 3 shows that students strongly correlate academic success with their strengths, helping them to build that success - this perception is in line with expert opinions (Goleman,

2008) which states that in achieving success not only cognitive factors are relevant, but also a range of skills and non-cognitive factors.

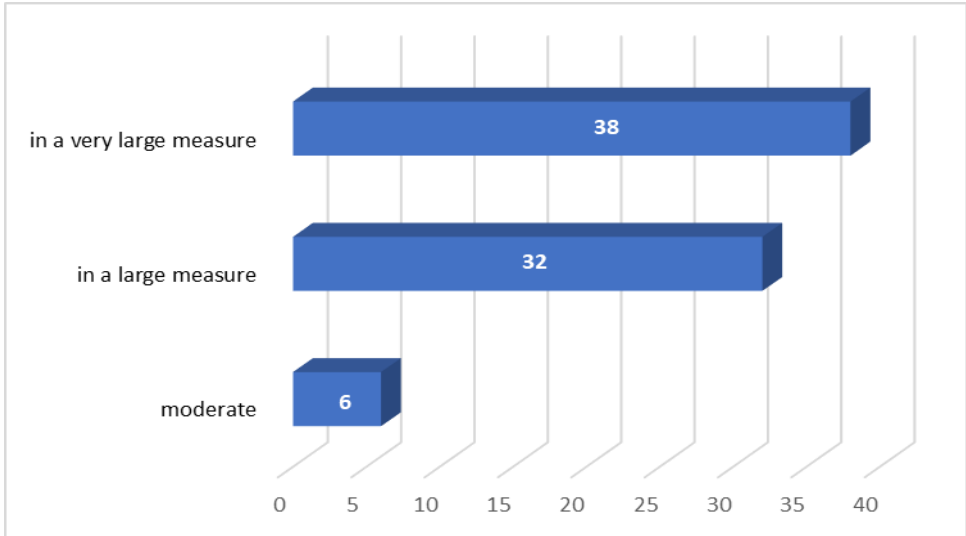


Fig. 3. To what extent students appreciate the way in which self-discovery and personal development activities can facilitate their academic success
Source: Authors' own conception

Interpersonal and social-emotional skills are important both in students' academic lives and in their relationships with others. Students highly value coaching activities as contexts in which are developed dimensions of their personality (figure 4). There are also a number of respondents who believe that those competences can be developed to a moderate extent through coaching activities.

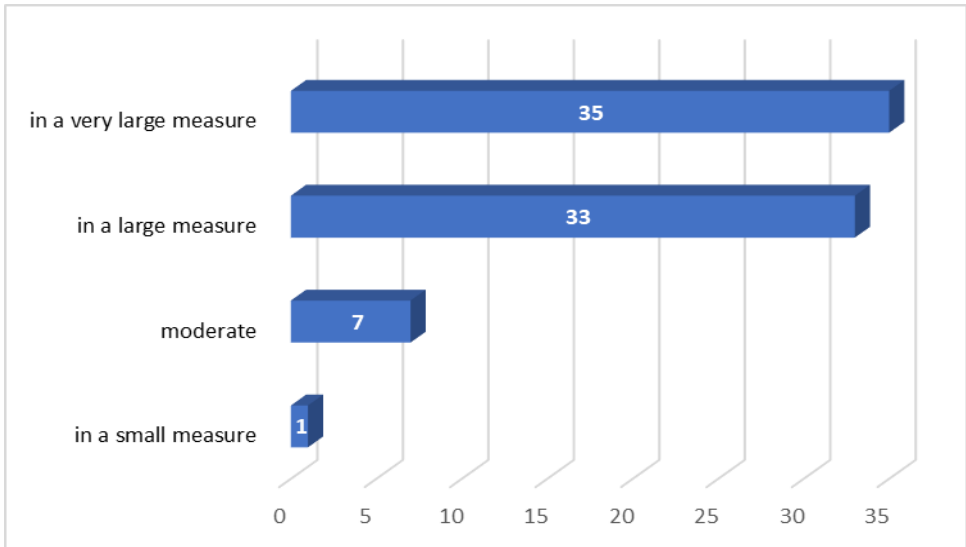


Fig. 4. To what extent students appreciate the way in which self-discovery and personal development activities can develop their social-emotional and interpersonal skills

Source: Authors' own conception

Making wise choices in life represents an ability that is closely linked to good self-knowledge. Optimising decision-making is a goal of coaching, but also a prerequisite for personal and professional success. The students consider that coaching activities, by facilitating processes of self-awareness and personal development, can greatly contribute to improving the decision-making process (figure 5).

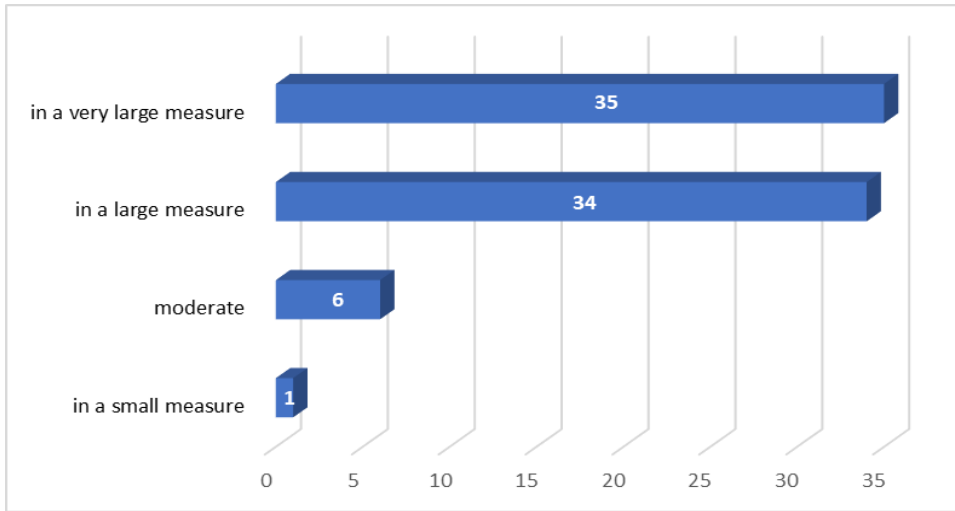


Fig. 5. To what extent students appreciate the way in which self-discovery and personal development activities can make positive choices in their personal and professional life

Source: Authors' own conception

The next item tried to capture the students' views on the need for being developed an online coaching platform at Valahia University of Targoviste. As can be seen from figure 6, the respondents positively appreciate the approach of developing such platform, which reflects, in fact, their need to have access to activities and services through which they can get to know themselves better and benefit from qualified support, in order to improve skills, develop competences and optimize different aspects of their personality and their student life.

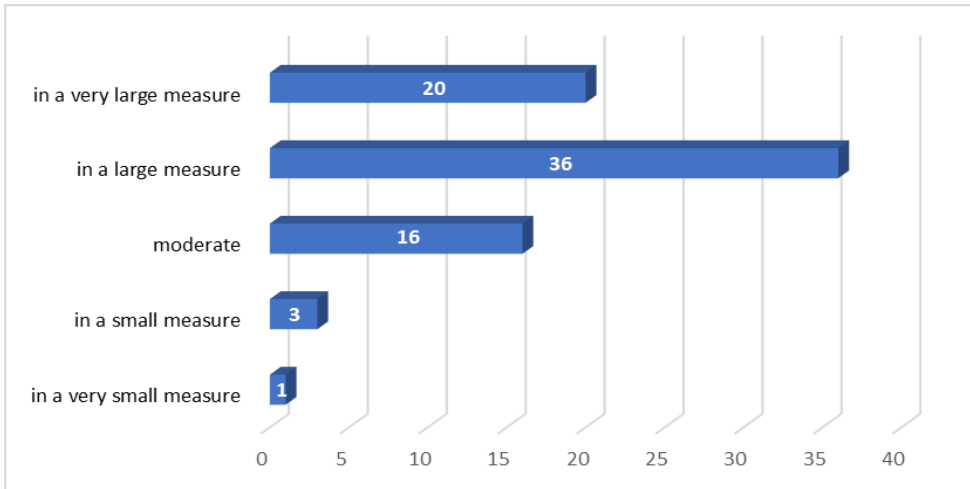


Fig. 6. To what extent students appreciate the initiative to develop an online academic coaching platform as a necessary one

Figure 7 summarises the students' self-perceived needs for personal and professional optimisation. The range of needs is broad, with the top needs mentioned by respondents including the need for personal development, facilitating learning and self-awareness. A very high weight is given to the needs to optimise communication and relationships, to manage stress, to make good decisions and to create and maintain the well-being status. Developing social-emotional skills, time management, setting short-, medium- and long-term goals, vocational counselling or increasing self-esteem are other needs mentioned by respondents. Developing resilience is not among the main needs listed by students.

Thus, among the basic needs that students have, there is also the need to optimise learning (knowledge of personal learning style, strategies to stimulate motivation for learning, methods and techniques to facilitate learning etc.), which should be known and facilitated by teachers.

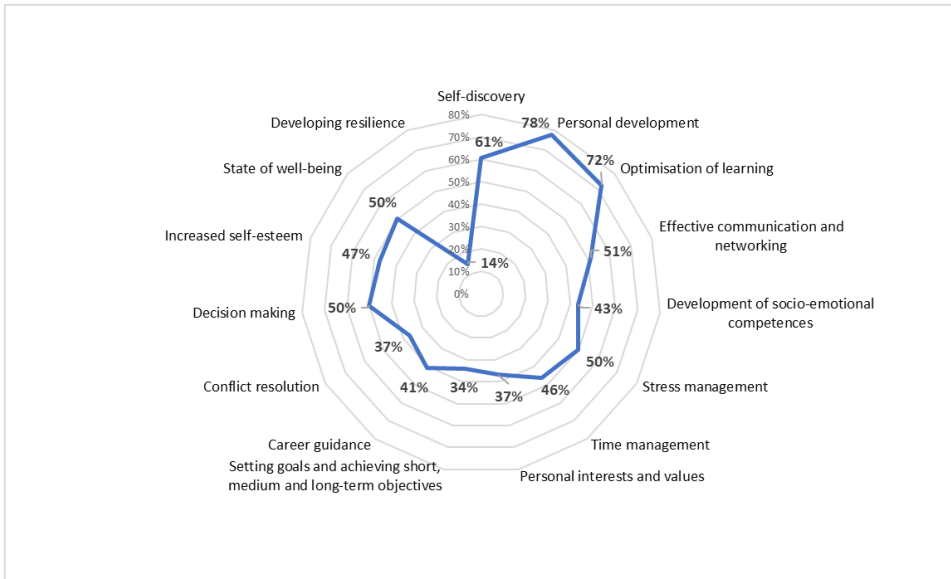


Fig. 7. The main coaching needs, expressed by students
Source: Authors' own conception

5. Conclusions and Implications

The school, as a flexible and dynamic institution, is constantly trying to find new methods and creative tools to improve specific teaching-learning-assessment processes and facilitate student success. Compared to changes in other fields, the school must be centred on the needs of its beneficiaries, that promotes quality, which *opens up* to the society, adopts, integrates and adapts models that prove their effectiveness. Students' success and performance depend not only on their cognitive abilities, but also on their socio-emotional skills, personality, and their attitudes, beliefs, values and ideals. Coaching, seen as a proactive relationship between teacher and student, responds to the natural human need for growth, development and evolution, and facilitates a range of processes carried out in school. According to Jones et al. (2016), coaching has positive effects at the cognitive level (knowledge), affective level (attitudes, motivations), but also in skill development; it also has multiple benefits on effective relationship building, resilience development, improves self-confidence and quality of life (Jarosz, 2020). Coaching activities help students getting know themselves better, becoming aware of their own strengths, but also discovering their vulnerabilities, setting goals and objectives for their own training and

adopting a receptive and reflective attitude. In a general sense, coaching activities develop a sense of belonging to the academic community and help students understand their unique value.

The research results show that there are major needs and concerns on the part of students regarding their own personal and professional training and development, which can be facilitated through the coaching process. Those results are also confirmed by the feedback received in other projects that also had a personal development component for the beneficiaries. The questioned students state that they are concerned about their process of growth and optimization of their cognitive, affective, social potential, they are aware of the importance of self-awareness in achieving academic success and for creating a status of well-being, contentment and self-acceptance, and they appreciate that the coaching process can be carried out effectively through the online coaching platform. This study also has some limitations: the relatively small number of respondents (students in first year of study), and also the fact that all the respondents are coming from Valahia University of Targoviste.

The novelty and originality of the concept of coaching in education mediated by the online platform was enthusiastically received by the responding students and understood as an important opening of the school towards their needs, appreciated and long awaited.

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