

Buckinghamshire New University

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What do positive psychology postgraduate students have to say about attending a coaching psychology congress?

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Introduction

We were really fortunate this year that the International Society for Coaching Psychology (ISCP) chose the engaging title of 'Positive Psychology Through the Life Course' for its London conference held as part of the 6th International Congress of Coaching Psychology. The ISCP are very keen to encourage and support students on Masters in Applied Positive Psychology courses (MAPP) who have an interest in attending conferences on Coaching Psychology and applied Positive Psychology and they sponsored seven of the Buckinghamshire New University MAPP students to attend.

The congress

The theme of the day that centered around this fitting title provided a thought-provoking range of talks and workshops, with topics ranging from 'coaching transitions at different life stages' to 'adopting a flourishing approach to coaching for health and wellbeing'. The international influence was also evident, although invited speakers were all affiliated closely with the UK. For example, the keynote speaker was Dr. Ilona Boniwell whose work is influential over the world, although she is a pioneer in running MAPP courses (currently the International MSc taught at Angela Ruskin University in both UK and France), and Zsolt Anna Utry was an invited speaker representing the Hungarian Association for Coaching Psychology who has strong links with UK Coaching Psychologists in developing a pluralistic model and approach to coaching.

The comments made by the students who were given the opportunity to attend through sponsorship clearly shows that they were stimulated by the presentations and inspired by the discussions. Overall, feedback was extremely positive and shows a good example of Barbara Fredrickson's 'Broaden and Build' theory of positivity in action: Students' enjoyed the experience and this opened up their thoughts and reflections to new ideas for their own dissertation topic or provided some food for thought around potential new pathways in their professional development, with some students being particularly keen to develop their coaching training and skills.

The students' voices are presented here in relation to five key areas. The opinions of the students are likely to be of interest to other MAPP students as well as to ISCP members who are eager to involve postgraduate students in research related developments in Coaching Psychology. Getting students involved through conference participation encourages research collaboration, and who better to consider for developing the next Positive Psychology interventions within the practice of Coaching Psychology than those studying Applied Positive Psychology at postgraduate level? A summary of the five areas of feedback from the students presented below are as follows: Conference expectations, Applying Positive Psychology learning, MAPP dissertation topics, Conference highlights and Recommendations.

Conference Expectations

A few of the students reported that they came with an open mind and without any real expectations. Others had expectations that were different to the actual experience but found this surprise to be welcoming. For example, one student had expected the conference to be much larger and claimed that the size “*made it more personal and friendlier*” and “*easier to speak with other people.*” (Jacqueline York, Bucks New University). Despite the many delights of large conferences, many people, including myself, can find large international conventions involving a medley of themes occasionally overwhelming and this is where more intimate conferences that involve professionals sharing a more closely defined area of interest, (in this case Positive Psychologists and Coaching Psychologists who are affiliated with or members of the ISCP within the UK) can be a welcome alternative. The ISCP conference in London was just the kind of event where the climate enabled attendees and participants to feel really involved in getting to know those people at the top of their game in Coaching Psychology. For students this meant that they felt they were really a part of the day’s events and had an important role to play in the discussions and workshops.

Some students commented that they were keen to find out more about the links between what they were learning in Positive Psychology and the practice of coaching. Others were eager to meet researchers they had already read about and admired from a distance. It was great to hear that such expectations had been surpassed. One student commented, “*I was surprised by the broad spectrum of applications of Coaching Psychology and very pleasantly surprised that, as a MAPP student, there was so much encouragement and interaction with both the speakers and the attendees*” (Monique Zahavi, Bucks New University).

There were also expectations that the conference might help inspire research ideas for a dissertation topic. Certainly some students came away feeling more motivated and confident about developing their own research project in applied Positive Psychology, as is discussed in the ‘MAPP dissertation topics’ section below.

Applying Positive Psychology learning

One student commented how the conference talks had reassured her that the way she was already applying her Positive Psychology learning experiences within her therapy practice were in many ways similar to the applications being used by Coaching Psychologists (Annie Collinge-Kissane, Bucks New University).

Some students found that attending the conference had provided the drive for continuing with their studies in Positive Psychology as well as the impetus to find out about courses in coaching so that they could put their learning into practice in a worthwhile way through coaching. One of the students commented, “*It was so inspiring.. I extended my knowledge of coaching psychology and crystallised the coaching ideas I had been considering. It has also informed me about which coaching courses to pursue*” (Lorraine Gear, Bucks New University).

MAPP dissertation topics

Some of the students found that the research presentations fueled their ideas for their own research. (“*It broadened my knowledge and understanding and gave me further ideas for my dissertation topic,*” Urszula Wolski, Bucks New University).

There were several comments about how those conducting research in schools and in the community demonstrated that models and measures within positive psychology, especially

around strengths, wellbeing and resilience, could be used successfully within coaching interventions for different groups of people, including vulnerable people, young people, parents and those facing new challenges at later stages of their life. For some, the range of topics opened up their minds to what was possible. For others, a particular talk helped to cement their ideas in progress around researching a particular target group, such as people from challenging backgrounds or people suffering health problems.

All in all, the talks stimulated students to move from ‘ideas’ to ‘action’ as expressed in the following quotation: *“I had been ‘nurturing’ ideas over the summer and the conference has greatly contributed to development of those ideas and how I might be able to put them into practice”* (Lorraine Gear, Bucks New University).

Conference highlights

There were many comments of praise made about the speakers. I already knew that the keynote speaker, Dr. Ilona Boniwell, was an excellent presenter from listening to her talks recently at the European Conference in Positive Psychology in Angers. Dr. Boniwell has a delightful way of relating to her audience in her message about developing and using tangible ways of coaching people using applied Positive Psychology techniques or tools. She uses the term ‘Thinkering’ to describe the way that coachees can be guided to think about and understand their own psychological attributes and processes through tinkering with objects. As someone who brings her ‘Positran’ strengths-cards into my coaching, I can vouch that they are a wonderful tool to use in either a one-to-one or group coaching setting. MAPP students commented that they were also inspired by Dr. Boniwell’s presentation at the ISCP conference. She was someone they already knew to be leading figure in the field of Positive Psychology and coaching and they found her ideas to be fascinating. Through discussions with the students I know that there were some who said that they were encouraged to consider trying out her recommendations for translating the science of Positive Psychology into a practical toolbox to use in a coaching capacity, either as part of their work or as part of their research.

I was fortunate enough to have the pleasure of introducing Mark Adams who I have heard present previously and who, at this ISCP conference, brought us up to date with his work on coaching in schools. The students’ feedback was really positive. Not only were they impressed with the work Mark Adams has been doing in developing coaching for educational practitioners, they were delighted by the engaging manner in which he presented his research to us. One student commented on the *“energy and enthusiasm”* (Jacqueline York, Bucks New University) shown by him during his delivery, a clear reflection of the passion Mark Adams has for using coaching to improve the success and wellbeing of students and educators in schools.

Another passionate speaker, who I have also listened to previously was Michelle Pritchard, whose earnest approach to sharing her somewhat moving and encouraging Positive Psychology coaching work in helping underprivileged young people was received really well by the MAPP students. Terms used to describe this presentation were ‘pioneering’, ‘moving’ and ‘thought-provoking’.

There was a lot of activity and excitement at the afternoon workshop on ‘Positive Psychology and Health Psychology through the life course’ run by Professor Stephen Palmer and Dr. Siobhain O’Riordan. Whilst much of that enjoyment came from coaching conversations around ‘health flourishing thoughts’, the afternoon cake-cutting and distribution process

offered an additional delight to the proceedings, providing an amusing level of irony to the workshop. As Professor Palmer pointed out, *“I have never before run a health coaching workshop that involves... cake”*. The workshop was really well received by the students who attended that session. One of the students made the following comment, *“Professor Stephen Palmer's ideas using coaching to enhance health and flourishing by changing simple behaviours, were not only personally useful, but have also given me some ideas for future study and I am looking forward to reading more of his work”* (Monique Zahavi, Bucks New University).

Although it was not possible to attend all the streams, the students seemed happy with the talks and workshops that they had chosen to attend and they were also interested in the reading the posters during the well-timed breaks.

Recommendations

Without a doubt, the students came away feeling very grateful and stimulated from the day's events and they reported that having this experience was something they would recommend to other MAPP students.

Some feedback indicated that student attendees believed that all MAPP students would add to their learning through attending the ISCP conference. One student said, *“I enjoyed the conference immensely and.. so grateful for the opportunity to go... ..I would most definitely recommend attending the conference to other MAPP students because it does add to your existing knowledge”* (Urszula Wolski, Bucks New University).

Another student commented, *“There's a wealth of information and also inspiration which would be an asset in supporting further studying and dissertation ideas. Just to know that people out there are practicing Applied Positive Psychology....makes it feel more real”* (Jacqueline York, Bucks New University).

Some of the student feedback suggested that certain students might benefit from attending these conferences more than others. Encouraging attendance and participation for students who are eager to apply their Positive Psychology to coaching practice was mentioned as a particularly good reason, as the following comments from students indicate:

“I would recommend it to people who are considering becoming coaches, or have a particular interest in coaching” (Annie Collinge-Kissane, Bucks New University).

“I would highly recommend it as it is full of practical ideas which are invaluable to MAPP students wishing to support/coach others” (Lorraine Gear, Bucks New University).

“I absolutely loved it... .. I definitely would recommend the ISCP conferences to other MAPP students. Not only was I hugely motivated by hearing about incredible work that is already happening, which no doubt changes lives, but I feel that conferences such as this one move students away from learning, from being immersed in study, towards the application of a real skill set in the real world. For me, I feel that is perhaps one of the most important realisations to come from attending the conference” (Monique Zahavi, Bucks New University).

Other positive comments made were around the opportunity the conference provided for meeting fellow students other than communicating within an online interactive environment,

as not all of the Bucks New University students attend the MAPP weekend sessions that usually take place at Missenden Abbey in Buckinghamshire. Some mentioned that they thought the BPS headquarters had been an ideal venue. I also know that everyone enjoyed the lunch and refreshments, especially the cake. For me, I really hope there are other opportunities to attend ISCP events with some of our MAPP students in the future. In fact, it would be a great incentive for those studying Positive Psychology to masters' level, to think of this annual conference as the place they aim to be presenting their own dissertation research at the following year.

Reference

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