LINK

Research mentoring schemes: A personalised needs-led approach

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Introduction

Participating in a mentoring scheme, as mentor or mentee, is a recognised form of researcher development. Vitae (2019) define mentoring as 'an ongoing, usually long-term, relationship between a more experienced or qualified person (the mentor) and a "mentee"', which is designed to guide and support mentee development. Our experience within a University School of Education has revealed some complexities to consider when managing a researcher mentoring scheme. White et al. (2014) described the School terrain as undulating, with roles shifting constantly so that developing as a researcher may involve engaging with different mentors at different

times for different issues. Colleagues are experienced professionals and mentoring needs to reflect their diverse backgrounds, areas of interest and the research culture within and beyond the School. In this thought-piece we summarise types of researcher mentoring arising within the School and describe a 'personalised needs-led' (Jarvis et al., 2012:37, original emphasis) approach to mentoring.

Trialling an institutional mentoring scheme

The Researcher Development Concordat (Vitae, 2019) encourages signatory higher education institutions in the UK to review their provision and plan how to provide evidence of progress towards improving support for researchers and researcher careers. In response to the Concordat institutions might choose to use structured researcher mentoring schemes involving online platforms. In the University of Hertfordshire School of Education, we were privileged to pilot such a scheme (White and Roberts, 2017).

This scheme was designed to: develop research skills; support participants' career progression; increase mentees' confidence in carrying out research; and provide

personal satisfaction for mentors. The overall aim was for higher quality research outputs and increased research capacity (Levesley et al., 2015).

Our experience surfaced the following considerations, which have informed our current mentoring approach:

1. The need to allocate time for mentor-mentee partnerships and to spread the role of mentoring across experienced individuals in order to enable sustainability.
2. The need for mentor development in areas such as understanding ethical issues in mentoring and supporting reflective practice.
3. The availability of alternative researcher development opportunities, which might be more appropriate.
4. On-line platforms can be inflexible when it comes to different models of mentoring.
5. Mentoring research degree students who are supervised can lead to conflicting advice, or mentors undertaking a supervisor's work.
6. Arranged mentor-mentee matches may be less effective than matches chosen by mentees.
7. Online mentoring management platforms might not be efficient when used infrequently, nor provide sufficient flexibility for selecting mentors based on need.

Research involving colleagues within the School

Using an apprenticeship model, drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), research findings within our School revealed that academics were apprenticed through a mixture of activities and relationships, according to their new role (White et al., 2014). Respondents were found to experience being 'apprentice as assistant to an adept [skilled and proficient colleague], apprentice as novice and apprentice as peer' (White et al., 2014:6). Unlike the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), there was not a sole skilled colleague to learn from, or a scheme that informed who took on the role or established the nature of apprenticeship. The selection of skilled colleagues was apprentice-led according to their current needs, and the arrangement was informal and personalised. This apprenticeship model reflects the informal collaborative and supportive culture within the School. Implications of this are that the newcomer is responsible for determining the mentoring support they need and the direction of development, though they may be influenced by others especially the mentor. Such diversity is difficult to manage, and ongoing changes in higher education add to the complexity of shaping the workforce with the relevant skills for the future.

An earlier study within the School demonstrated a more formal process, which supported researcher development; 'a personalised needs-led self-study group approach' used for induction of experienced professionals (Jarvis et al., 2012:37, original emphasis). Current members of staff and new colleagues met together, enabling a form of group and peer mentoring. This approach enabled trust to develop within the group, supporting openness and risk taking and providing opportunities for professional learning for all members of the group.

'A personalised needs-led approach'

Many models of mentoring can be used to support researcher development, ranging, for example, from conventional mentoring pairs to peer group mentoring and informal conversations (Table 1). These models lie along a continuum of mentoring practice and within the School a 'personalised needs-led approach' to research mentoring has developed, which embraces this complexity. Colleagues can access different types of mentoring and mentoring can be mentee-led, structured, informal or formal. In some cases mentoring involves elements of what Feiman-Nemser (1998:66) described as '"educative" mentoring' in the teacher education setting; a concept recently critiqued by Mackintosh (2019). In the context of research mentoring in the School of Education this might be visualised as mentoring that supports researchers as they enhance their ability to carry out research and 'develop the skills and dispositions to continue learning in and from their practice' (Feiman-Nemser, 1998:66). Educative mentoring is based on constructivist theories of learning (Richter et al., 2013), which suggest that knowledge is co-constructed from experience as learners collaborate with others in authentic activities and have opportunities to use their new knowledge (Edward, 2001). Within the School of Education, the nature of the mentoring adopted in each case depends on the mentor, the mentee(s), the specific needs of the mentee(s) and their relationship.

Going forward, one challenge will be to provide equal opportunities for all colleagues to access mentoring that is appropriate for them. Rather than relying solely on a mentee-led approach, offers for mentoring conversations are circulated to all academic staff via email and direct approaches are made to individuals to explore any mentoring needs.

Table 1: Types of mentoring in the University of Hertfordshire School of Education

Model of mentoring	How we see it happening

Conventional mentoring pairs (Pleschová & McAlpine, 2015)	Mentor-mentee pairing with a specific focus. Examples: 1. Academic writing 2. Data analysis 3. Doctoral supervision (new doctoral supervisors pairing with more experienced ones) 4. Readership or professorship preparation.
Apprenticeship model with an adept and an apprentice (Lave & Wenger, 1991)	Could be assistant to an adept, apprentice as novice and apprentice as peer (White et al., 2014). Example: Informal mentoring as more experienced researchers and newer researchers conduct research projects together. This might involve multiple mentors and mentees.
Self-study group approach (Jarvis et al., 2012)	Example: A group of staff joining the School of Education engaging in self-study with more experienced colleagues as part of induction.
Peer group mentoring (Geeraerts et al., 2015)	Within the group there is a range of expertise, with each member contributing as both mentor and mentee. Example: A group established so that members can learn from each other and develop specific research skills, such as academic reading or writing.
Mentoring conversations (Buckner, 2019)	Example: Impromptu corridor conversations as a colleague discusses aspects of their research with another researcher.

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