



QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

Mentoring Postdoctoral/Research Staff

A line manager's guide to supporting the professional and career development of research staff.

Research Mentoring

Guide to Mentoring Postdoctoral/Research Staff

Line managers of researchers have a responsibility to ensure staff conduct their research and complete the research project for which they have been employed. Within this role there is an expectation by the University that line managers will also mentor researchers to support their professional and career development.

This maybe a role you have extensive experience of or to which you are relatively new. However, you may sometimes find that these conversations take you out of your comfort zone or area of expertise. This brief guide highlights issues to consider when having these conversations and highlight some of the tools available to make research mentoring conversations with research staff successful.

Positive outcomes from research mentoring will not be restricted to the mentor and mentee but benefit the school and university as a whole through 'enriching the research environment' (Research Mentoring in Higher Education in England, 2015). Mentoring will improve the quality of research by improving the individual's skills and their increased workplace engagement.

Also, providing research staff with greater opportunities to benefit from mentoring will support the implementation of the current Research Strategy, which seeks to "Foster a vibrant postgraduate and postdoctoral community: Growing our postgraduate and postdoctoral cohorts, drawing them into our wider research culture, and providing the highest-quality learning and training environment".

Postdoctoral positions should normally be training roles, with an expectation that the majority will be able to take the next step in their careers no later than the end of their second research contract. Providing research staff with greater opportunities to benefit from mentoring can support their career development, whether that will be in academia or beyond.

Research mentoring guidelines

What is mentoring?

Mentoring provides a supportive relationship whereby a more experienced member of staff undertakes to guide and support a new member of staff, to adjust and to understand and become effective in their role. On an ongoing basis mentoring will further enable the mentee in the reviewing and planning of their career.

All mentoring relationships are unique and as such a mentor can provide support in a number of ways such as:

Sounding Board	to test ideas and make suggestions
Facilitator	to be able to point to potential opportunities, arrange introductions
Advisor	to provide objective advice on a range of issues, including career opportunities
Coach	to directly assist the mentee to improve a specific skill
Expert	to act as a source of technical/professional knowledge
Source of organisational material	to be able to explain University policies, culture, values
Role model	to promote and encourage positive behaviours in others
Source of feedback	to provide constructive feedback
Confidant	to express fears and concerns to
Motivator	to encourage the achievement of goals and boost morale
Challenger	to challenge assumptions and encourage alternative thinking

As a line manager and/or mentor you are likely to be in an influential position with research staff. The Careers in Research Survey 2011 found that almost three-quarters (72%) of Queen's research staff, who responded, rated their Principal Investigators highest in terms of people with whom they discuss their career development. Mentoring staff about career options and decisions may come naturally to you, in particular when they seek to follow an academic career. However, research by Vitae (www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd) has found that the majority of those trained in academic research go on to 'other' careers and that these individuals contribute in many different types of jobs and areas of the economy.

As a mentor your knowledge of the Queen's research environment and organisational culture will be important to the integration of research staff into your research area and the University.

The mentee will benefit from your knowledge of the Queen's research environment and your guidance will be important in developing

To support the role of the line manager Organisational Development provides a series of career development workshops for researchers. In these workshops researchers can review and undertake planning around their career, which can include investigating careers outside academia. Researchers also have access to a careers advisor for one-to-one career coaching. Many Schools have a Research Staff Societies which organise school-based career development events for researchers.

What does mentoring aim to do?

- Help build self confidence
- Sharing knowledge, skills and experience
- Help with career assessment and planning – goal setting
- Help with identifying opportunities to develop, exploring options, action planning.
- Support with Networking
- Understanding organisational culture
- Sounding board – gain another perspective
- Encourage independence

What does mentoring not deal with?

- Does not deal with: counselling, psychology or mental health, personal trauma, dependency etc.
- In these situations, recognise the boundaries and be aware of referral options should they be necessary.

What are the benefits of mentoring?

For the mentee:

- A smoother adjustment to a new role or position
- Help in acquiring more quickly and comprehensively the skills and knowledge they need
- Guidance on career development
- A greater understanding of both the formal and informal workings of the organisation

For the mentor:

- Contributes to your personal and professional development
- Enhances your communication and facilitation skills
- Provides evidence of your abilities in supporting and managing people
- Personal satisfaction in helping to develop the potential of others
- Different perspective of the University's research culture and landscape through listening to the views of more junior staff
- An opportunity to share experience and expertise.

Approaches to mentoring

How mentoring operates will vary from department to department and with each individual member of staff. Outlined below are some guidelines for those schools that do not have formal research and teaching mentoring in place for research staff.

The following table, adapted from Klasen and Clutterbuck (*Implementing Mentoring Schemes*, 2002), sets out some of the characteristics of a developmental mentoring process.

Always	Sometimes	Never
Listening & questioning with empathy	Using coaching behaviours	Punitive
Sharing experience & learning	Providing help and support	Performance management
Developing insight through reflection	Opening doors	Supervision
Being a sounding board & confidant	Brokering or facilitating links	Assessment for third party
Professional &/or critical friendship	Didactic	
Partnership		
Challenging		
Set up with specific outcomes intended		

One of the specific aims of research mentoring is to help develop a career in research. This requires the development of research skills, but also networking, building a strong set of publications and contributing to grant applications. It also requires developing a fuller picture of what career pathways might be possible, skills such as learning how to write stronger job applications and knowledge such as understanding where to publish. (Research Mentoring in Higher Education in England, 2015)

Essentially the mentoring role is one of guidance - someone who is able to advise, encourage, support and help to develop an individual's ability to think for themselves and take responsibility for their own professional development.

When to have research mentoring conversations?

These may take place during the formal appraisal process: however, the annual appraisal does not always represent the best opportunity to focus on career, as it's focused on the performance of researcher in undertaking their research project specific duties.

Within the appraisal process research staff are asked to briefly outline their short, medium and long-term career goals. This can be used to start a conversation about their career plans and to investigate what they hope to achieve and what options they have considered. As a line manager you are not expected to be a careers advisor but you can use these conversations to encourage the researcher to consider how they can move forward with their career.

Having a mentoring approach to ongoing discussions with research staff can aid the career review and planning by researchers. The mentor can ask questions and make suggestions but the onus is on the researcher to take responsibility for their own professional and career development. Any development solutions agreed between the manager and researcher should be 'own' by the researcher. These can be influenced by the manager/mentor through the use of a questioning/coaching approach, which can encourage the researcher/mentee to reflect on their career development plans and importantly the options available to them.

What are research career conversations?

The type of career conversations you have with research staff should take into account the individual and their needs. They might include:

1. Insight into self – including what an individual wants from a career and what they bring to it (attributes, expertise, potential etc.)
2. Identifying options – including potential job roles and how the current climate (economic, social, technological etc.) impacts on opportunities
3. Planning – actions to help the researcher to understand themselves, identify their options or move closer to achieving career goals.

For many academic managers, based on their own experience, they will have a clear understanding of how a researcher can plan and take actions that will move them forward in their research career.

Developing your skills to have career conversations is one way to make these discussions effective. One tool or resource that can be used is coaching-style questions. You can learn more about using a coaching approach in the workshops highlighted in the Resources for Mentors section below.

Research Mentoring Skills

Skills/Behaviours and responsibilities of mentor:

1. Listening
2. Asking powerful questions
3. Giving Feedback
4. Making opportunities available
5. Supporting
6. Maintaining Confidentiality

Behaviours and responsibilities of mentee:

1. Listening
2. Reflecting
3. Taking Responsibility
4. Committing to action

Summary

Line managers have a key role to play in conducting performance reviews and agreeing researchers' development plans. Yet they also do much more. In your role as a managers of researchers you structure and enable learning opportunities for researchers. This can be enhanced by mentoring and guidance.

Appendix 1 Resources to support research mentoring

Resources for Managers

Queen's Staff mentoring website: in particular view the [Guide to Mentoring Staff](#) – Online Booklet

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/HumanResources/learning-and-development/staff-mentoring/>

Vitae: mentoring research staff:

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/pis-on-mentoring-research-staff>

Staff Development workshops:

[Learning for All](#)

[People Manager Essentials](#)

[Leadership and Management Development](#)

Resources for research staff

[Queens Researcher Development](#)

[Online Learning](#)

[LinkedIn Learning](#)

Career management questions for researchers

Am I regularly assessing my skills development - recording my progress and setting further goals? (Organisational Development provides services designed for researchers.)

Am I making sure that I review my progress and my career ambitions with my PI (supervisor/manager), during career management review meetings? Research Staff can access careers skills workshops, including 1:2:1 career conversations and online resources.

If I have a fixed-term contract, do I know what this means for me?

Am I continually reviewing and, as necessary, updating my career plan?

Am I looking at personal funding opportunities for which I am eligible? (If you are eligible to apply for personal research funding, the Research Development Office offers, amongst others, support in applying for and managing research grants.)

Am I keeping my CV up to date?

Am I being responsible for finding and engaging with training and development opportunities available to me?

Am I maintaining and developing useful networks?

If I wish to stay in academia, am I aware of my possibilities for promotion? (The University's generic job descriptions for research and academic posts are available, for information, online.)

Additional questions for experienced researchers:

i.e. researchers on their second contract and beyond

Have I considered opportunities for expanding my role (e.g. contributing to research planning, project management, writing grant applications, teaching duties)?

Have I considered acting as a mentor to early-career researchers?

Career Development Workshops

[Developing Your Research Career](#)

[Developing your CV for Researchers](#)

[Preparing for Interviews](#)