

15 minutes to develop your research career

Podcast Transcript

Episode 3: Academic mentoring

Claire Doffegnies: Hello. Thanks for downloading this podcast. This is the [Taylor & Francis Vitae](#) podcast on developing your research career. I'm Claire Doffegnies from Taylor & Francis.

Marie Thouaille: And I'm Marie Thouaille from Vitae.

Claire Doffegnies: And in this episode, Marie and I are going to be exploring academic mentoring. What is mentoring and why is it so important for career development?

Nigel Leady: How do you get from being just a member of the team to being someone running the team? Mentoring really helps with those career transitions.

Claire Doffegnies: The role of academic mentor and mentee, how can you get the most out of it?

Marie Thouaille: When you're working in academia, your immediate boss, he or she, no matter how lovely they are, they have their own personal agenda. And if both your objectives align, it's brilliant, but sometimes they don't.

Claire Doffegnies: How can you make mentoring work for you and what makes a good mentor and mentee? And what skills can you develop through mentoring?

Usma Asghar: As part of the scheme, what I think we're mentoring them into is a better understanding of how to say what difference their work makes.

Marie Thouaille: I'm here with Usma Asghar at the [Institute of Cancer Research](#). So, Usma, it would be great if you could tell us a little bit about what you do?

Usma Asghar: I am a doctor by training. I'm training to be a cancer specialist, and at the moment I am doing the final year of PhD as a post graduate student at the Institute of Cancer Research, specifically in breast cancer now. When I came here I was very fortunate that [The Royal Marsden](#) and ICR have a very close relationship, and they were at that time looking into mentorship so I managed to find the right people and I was fortunate they listened to my view points. They decided that it would be beneficial to set up a female mentorship program where senior clinical members or senior doctors working at The Royal Marsden will take a female junior colleague under their wing, and a partnership was created that way.

Marie Thouaille: What were you hoping to get out of it?

Usma Asghar: I think academia is quite a challenging field. It's very competitive and most of us feel that it's quite cut throat. At times, I felt like I needed some unbiased opinion from someone I wasn't directly working with, so I think that was my main motive, to try to get hold of a senior person who's

been through similar challenges that I have been through, almost like an older sister or an aunt, and actually be able to give me their words of wisdom, and actually at times just kick me up the backside and say, "Actually, this is the reality of the world that you live in, and just deal with it." And most importantly, if they work in the same institution they're aware of the political issues and the situations, and occasionally they can just say one little remark and it could save you a whole month's worth of grief. I think what I didn't realize is that, when you're working in academia, your immediate boss; he or she, no matter how lovely they are, they have their own personal agenda. And if both your objectives align, it's brilliant, but sometimes they don't.

Marie Thouaille: So, from a more practical point of view, how did you develop your relationship with your mentor? Was there any training in place or how did that start?

Usma Asghar: So, as part of our program we had to select our mentors, so you'd put a choice of, for example, one to three or one to five. And the person I selected was intentionally someone who demographically reflected my own origins, someone who I knew was a working mom, who was working full time and actually excelling in her field.

Marie Thouaille: What kind of training did you receive as part of the scheme?

Usma Asghar: So, I think in terms of training, what the institute was very good at was they set up two or three sessions where academics came in and actually gave us talks about academia and mentorship. They gave us advice on how to make it work; so, for example, to make sure that when you go into a meeting, to have a meeting plan or objectives that you want, and they made us aware of confidentiality and whether we wanted to have a confidentiality clause. For some people that might be important. So it meant that, when I was seeing my mentor at six o'clock after her busy clinic, I wasn't wasting her time or mine.

Marie Thouaille: I think that sounds really helpful because I've been matched up with a mentor as well, but my first meeting was so awkward. I had a list of things that I wanted to talk about but we'd never really met before, apart from an email, so there was a sense of, "So, tell me about your career." It was a lot like a blind date. I think it was slightly awkward but we did like each other.

Marie Thouaille: If you could give someone embarking on a mentoring program for the first time a top tip, whether they're a mentee or a mentor, what would it be?

Usma Asghar: I would advise them to choose a mentor who they weren't directly working with. I would advise them to go and meet that person a couple of times to decide before they further commit. So, what I would advise them is to give your mentor three sessions at least, and ideally it should be someone you like.

Nigel Leady: Hi, I'm Nigel Leady. I'm head of researcher training and development at [Kings College London](#), and my role is to provide opportunities for all our PhD students and all our research staff to ensure that they're well prepared to deliver brilliant research whilst they're at Kings, but can also make the next steps in their career onwards, wherever that may take them.

Marie Thouaille: Let's talk about how mentoring actually works. If you're mentoring someone, how should you approach building an effective relationship with your mentee?

Nigel Leady: If I was advising a mentor on a crucial element for the mentoring relationship it would be what many people in this mentoring world call having a contract, and regularly contracting with your mentee throughout the relationship. It's a bit of jargon but all it really means is setting really clear expectations at the start of the relationship. Who's going to organize the meetings? How often are you going to meet? Where are you going to meet? And beyond the basic logistics, how are you going to work together, what is it that you're trying to achieve? And I think, crucially, part of that is helping your mentee to see that you're not just going to give them lots of advice, you're not just going to answer their questions constantly and tell them what to do, but actually you're going to make the mentee think, you're going to help them to problem solve, tackle their own problems and challenges, so that they're developing their own capacity rather than becoming totally reliant on you.

Marie Thouaille: So, in a way, mentoring is a way of empowering the mentee to take control of their career and think about their long term goals?

Nigel Leady: Yeah, absolutely. And I think mentees should be driving the mentoring relationship. They're in the driving seat.

Marie Thouaille: If you could give someone embarking on a mentoring program for the first time a top tip, whether they're a mentee or a mentor, what would it be?

Nigel Leady: I think my advice to a mentee would be about not expecting your mentor to tell you what to do. I think my top tip for a mentor would be about being unafraid of silence, because in my experience the silences are often the moments in which the mentee is really thinking, grappling with a problem, trying to work moment.

Claire Doffegnies: That was Usma Asghar from the Institute of Cancer Research, and also Nigel Leady from Kings College London. Both of them confirm from their experience that formal mentoring schemes can be a really useful way of empowering research students. But what if you're a student in an institution without a formal mentoring scheme in place, and maybe in a developing nation without that kind of support? [AuthorAID](#) is a global network that provides support to researchers in developing countries, and we spoke to Andy [inaudible 00:07:43] from AuthorAID to find out about the AuthorAID mentoring program.

Andy: We started the AuthorAID project. We were aware that a lot of important research is not being written up or communicated properly to the rest of the world so our goal is support early career researchers in developing countries to publish and communicate their work. We work in lots of different ways to do this. One way is we're working with quite a small number of key institutions in our focus countries, which is Ghana, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, and we work with those institutions to embed research writing skills in their curriculum at their institutions. In many developing countries we're aware that researchers face the same intense pressure to publish as researchers do in developed countries, but they don't often have the same access to support networks or training and resources that we take for granted in developed countries. There also

tends to be a lack of mentors. So we wanted to go some way to bridge this gap and also provide a way that experienced researchers can make a difference.

Olwa Kamaratimi: I am Olwa Kamaratimi. I carry out research in the field of chemistry and toxicology at [Covenant University in Nigeria](#). I met my mentor in February last year so relationship is going to a year now. First of all she has helped in my research. Because epigenetics is actually our field so I could work in the lab and not get results. I could snap my gel, send it to her and say, "This is what I got. What do you think is happening," and she would reply me that, "Oh, this is what you should do. Try this protocol instead of this protocol." It was really interesting. In terms of writing, I just submitted the manuscript that we worked on together, although it has not been accepted but is under review. She helped in correcting the way the manuscript was structured, because I just wrote it but the message was not being passed across properly, so she tried to help me do that.

And, of course, she also introduced the particulars [inaudible 00:10:13] analysis which I could introduce to the work, that could help bring down my results better, which I did. I didn't know about that before I learned that from her.

Andy: The online mentoring service is a free platform and we have a database of over 14,000 members. You can search for somebody to work with as either a mentor or a mentee, and the website can offer suitable matches for you or you can search for a mentor or a mentee yourself. You can search by subject specialism, by the type of support you need or support you're offering, or you can search for people in particular countries. Mentees can seek help with tasks such as article structure, basic language editing, proof reading, or more complex things such as interpreting data or creating a posted presentation. Perhaps developing a grant proposal or much more long term things such as career planning or career mentoring.

Ishmael Aaron Kimire: My name's Ishmael Aaron Kimire, from the [Tanzania Fisheries Research Institute](#) based in Kigoma on the eastern shores of Lake Tanganyika. So, why I become an AuthorAID mentor? I think the developing world is deprived of publications. That's everywhere. There's very little information coming out of the developing world. So I edit both English and, of course, the science, if I can, also guide on the floor of the text. And at some point you have also to... the current mentee I have, I have also helped them work on their job applications and applications for studies. And at some point, also, I guide them on what analysis they need to do to bring up their results, their papers, then help them also as they are responding to reviewers. And so I'm a very happy guy when the paper is accepted.

Andy: We have a couple of success stories. There was Joshua Okonya, he is an entomologist from Uganda who was struggling to get his research accepted in journals and he signed up as a mentee in around 2013. Since then, in the next two years he published over nine papers, a couple of which were on sweet potatoes, which were pretty well cited. He's not decided to give something back by registering as a mentor.

Claire Doffegnies: That was Andy from [AuthorAID](#), and if you'd like to find out more about them, then have a look at their website, which is [authoraid.info](#).

As well as academic institutions, some journals are also seeing the importance of providing mentoring help to researchers on the cusp of writing their first journal article. Maryanne Dever is the joint editor in chief of Australian Feminist Studies, a journal which runs a mentoring scheme for new academic writers.

Maryanne Dever: The scheme is open to new academic writers, and we define that as someone who's anywhere between the final stages of doctoral study and up to three years post PhD. We work with the successful participants over a six to 12 month period and this work might involve email exchanges, Skype, or face to face meetings, and we generally do try to meet with our mentees at least once face to face, regardless of where they are in the world. What we do is, we take them and their article from the draft stage to a developed manuscript, and that might involve differing number of revisions. The manuscript then goes through peer review and we work with them after that to interpret and respond to reviewers reports, and then we help them to finalize their manuscript. What we're looking to engender in them, I think, is an understanding of the difference between a really solid manuscript, which lots of people can produce, and a compelling one that makes a genuine intervention in intellectual debates.

I think there are two things that I've learned, really. One is just how quickly a writing sample can reveal who's got talent and who's got cutting edge ideas. I think the other thing I've learned is really just how open young researchers are to input and advice. I think my tip for any mentoring scheme would be this. You need to be focused. Mentoring can't cover everything, it can't solve everything, so you really have to know exactly what it is you're wanting assistance on, exactly where you need strategic advice, and you have to be up front about that and be able to articulate it clearly.

Claire Doffegnies: That's all for today. Thank you very much for listening. We'll see you here next time.