Researcher connections: postdoc challenges and a research staff mentoring scheme at the University of Oxford

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UK postdoc development: context
Postdoc support at Oxford
Medical Sciences Research Staff Peer Mentoring Scheme: overview

In pilot: 55 mentees, 18 mentors
Pilot

Evaluation

– Interim questionnaire (mentees)
– Interim meeting (mentors)
– Pre- and post-programme self-reflection questionnaire (mentees)
– Post-programme questionnaire (mentors)
Please describe what you hope to gain through the mentoring scheme

1. Academic career (22)
2. Career planning (not stated) (14)
3. Networking (8)
4. Alternative career options (6)
5. Work-life balance (5)
6. Finding funding (3)
Pre-programme data (N=51)

- I am confident applying for grants: 14%
- I know where to go for support with my development: 28%
- I set aside time to reflect on my development: 29%
- I have identified plans to achieve my career goals: 33%
- I can manage my time effectively: 37%
- I know how to publish strategically: 39%
- I know in what areas I would like to develop professionally: 53%
- I have a good idea of the career options available to me: 57%
- I have a career goal: 57%
- I am satisfied with my work/life balance: 59%
- I can deliver effective, engaging presentations: 63%
- I am confident managing relationships with my colleagues: 73%
- I have the skills necessary to write a research paper: 84%
- I have the skills to effectively search the medical literature: 86%
- I can critically evaluate the medical literature: 88%
Themes emerging

career paths (inside and outside academia)

grant applications

finding teaching

work-life balance;
when to have children

dealing with difficult colleagues
Post-programme comments

– Subject specificity

Individual mentoring by someone in a relevant research field would be very much better.

It would have been beneficial if the mentor had been working in the same area and in a comparable post to me. I would have appreciated more advice specific to my career and goals, rather than generic advice on academic careers.

– How to match mentees? Criteria?

It is impossible to arrange a meeting between 3 other people who each have different goals and different problems

Not good matching within the group - time-expired post-doc vs trialist who left to go back to Canada vs hyperambitious pregnant post-doc.
Other issues

We started trying to arrange the second meeting but then I never heard from them again...

It's almost impossible in Oxford to find convenient meeting times, esp when this involves people from different departments / locations

Organize it so that it is a one-on-one mentorship. Otherwise there is just no time for the mentor to concentrate on 3 other people.
Pre- and post-programme self-reflection questionnaires: comparison

**Personal effectiveness**

- I am satisfied with my ability to manage my time effectively
  - % agree pre (N=51): 28%
  - % agree post (N=24): 39%

- I am satisfied with my work/life balance
  - % agree pre (N=51): 29%
  - % agree post (N=24): 52%

- I am confident networking with others
  - % agree pre (N=51): 39%
  - % agree post (N=24): 61%

- I am confident managing relationships with my colleagues
  - % agree pre (N=51): 57%
  - % agree post (N=24): 64%
Pre- and post-programme self-reflection questionnaires: comparison

Research and teaching

- I am confident applying for grants
  - Pre: 14%, Post: 22%
- I know how to find teaching opportunities
  - Pre: 22%, Post: 52%
- I am confident teaching students
  - Pre: 22%, Post: 52%
- I know how to publish strategically
  - Pre: 45%, Post: 61%
- I can deliver effective, engaging presentations
  - Pre: 33%, Post: 63%
- I have the skills necessary to write a research paper
  - Pre: 57%, Post: 73%
- I have the skills necessary to effectively search the medical literature
  - Pre: 61%, Post: 76%
- I can critically evaluate the medical literature
  - Pre: 63%, Post: 86%
Pre- and post-programme self-reflection questionnaires: comparison

Career and professional development

- I set aside time to reflect on my career and professional development
  - % agree pre (N=51): 28
  - % agree post (N=24): 48

- I have identified specific plans to achieve my career goals
  - % agree pre (N=51): 39
  - % agree post (N=24): 61

- I know where to go for support with my development
  - % agree pre (N=51): 53
  - % agree post (N=24): 61

- I have a career goal
  - % agree pre (N=51): 57
  - % agree post (N=24): 65

- I have a good idea of the career options available to me
  - % agree pre (N=51): 59
  - % agree post (N=24): 65

- I know in what areas I would like to develop professionally
  - % agree pre (N=51): 84
  - % agree post (N=24): 78
Mentors: What has been the impact for you?

Became more in touch with certain challenging aspects of postdoc life at Oxford.

Confidence that I can make a difference to people.

I've really enjoyed supporting my mentees in discussing their career aims and how to get there. It's also helped me develop more skills to support PDR for my own team as well as myself.
Overall...

• 80% of mentees had met without the mentor
• 23% will continue in same circle
• 82% of mentees who responded would recommend it to a colleague
• 89% of mentors who responded (N=9) would recommend it to colleagues or postdocs they manage
Next steps

• Re-brand?
  – Career conversations, for those who lack direction
  – Better guidance for those wanting 1:1 (sponsorship?)

• Include in training (e.g. grant workshops)

• Mentor resources and direction?

• More logistical support...?
Conclusions

• More Ns needed for better evaluation
• Might not be able to please everybody
• Perhaps not a replacement for 1:1
• Need careful information to manage expectations
• But worth doing!
Questions for discussion

• Do you have similar schemes?
• If so, what’s gone well, or not so well?
• If not, what alternatives do you have in place?
• Would/could you set up something along these lines?
• What challenges do you face supporting your postdocs?
• How do you ensure PIs are equipped to manage/develop their postdocs?
• What models do you have for giving support outside of the PI/postdoc relationship?