



UK Academic Mentoring Best Practice

Principles and Behaviours



Foreword

During my career, I have never met a fellow professional working in academic research who does not agree that mentoring is essential to researchers' continuous professional development.

Encouragingly, mentoring is already being extensively used, in many forms, as a tool to support researchers' development and reflective practice. While this diversity of approaches can provide inclusive engagement opportunities, we nevertheless felt there was a strong case for gathering the perspectives of a broad range of people involved in mentoring. Together we could develop a framework that helps clarify best practice and continues to support the development and implementation of mentoring in academia into the future.

Following engagement with the community, including funders, researchers, practitioners, professional services staff, and coaches and mentors, we hosted a workshop to discuss core principles and behaviours to enable mentoring in academia. There was a strong consensus that the development and publication of a core principles framework would be beneficial in highlighting and empowering the changes needed to support a more consistent approach to mentoring and career development, and on how to more widely emphasise the value of mentoring and its impact on individuals and institutions.

This document is a culmination of those discussions. It is a framework that sets out both the starting principles and best practices for those funding, developing and delivering mentoring, as well as the behavioural changes and beneficial outcomes that can be expected when these are applied. The choices around implementation are left for individual settings, with the intention that the framework provides the support and leverage to facilitate that process.



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Scope

This framework aims to catalyse the integration of mentoring as a fundamental and routine element of researcher development. It is designed to help and support those working in varied settings and at different career stages. Furthermore, this framework advocates for the value of embedding, incentivising, and properly evaluating mentoring practices.

Our ambition is for high-quality mentoring to become an embedded and strategic tool for enhancing research culture, talent development, and leadership progression across all career stages, including those who are in established roles.

This statement has emerged out of conversations with those experienced in the academic sector in the United Kingdom. Whereas academic pathways and career support will look different in other areas of the global research landscape, there are unifying themes that can be built upon, and it is our hope to revisit the response to this framework with an international perspective at a future date.

To support that ambition, this framework will provide:

- **Clarification of key definitions:** Important terms and concepts are defined, with a focus on the intersection between mentoring and sponsorship. This framework also outlines the principles and behaviours that constitute effective mentoring.
- **A consensus for communications:** A common language is established, aimed at engaging researchers, research organisations, funders, collaborators, and other stakeholders about these principles and behaviours.
- **Guidance that reflects best practice:** The principles and behaviours outlined in this framework aim to support the recognition of mentoring as core to career development and promote the validation of mentoring commitments.
- **Support for practical measures that embed mentoring:** This framework is intended to aid the development, evaluation, investment management, and funding assurance for mentoring schemes.
- **Encouragement for developing a community of practice:** This community of research practitioners should be dedicated to sharing experiences and mutual learning.

- **Foundational ideas:** A basis for understanding how individuals, institutions, funders, and other relevant stakeholders can support, recognise, and incentivise positive mentoring.
- **Flexible guidance for research institutions:** This is a high-level, flexible framework that can be adapted for all staff, researchers, technical teams, professional services, and others involved in the research process. The contextual factors of specific career pathways, disciplines, and geographical regions should be considered when interpreting this high-level guidance.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a core mechanism for enabling a researcher's continuous professional development (CPD). It is distinct from – but related to – complementary ways of fostering researcher development. Figure 1 defines five categories of roles in support and development relationships:

Advocacy	Coaching	Mentoring	Sponsoring	Supervising/ Line Managing
Speaking on behalf of others	Guiding techniques and specific skills needed to advance career/education	Coaching-style conversations plus experience-based sharing and guidance	Leveraging influence, networks, or position to promote a colleague's career advancement	Being responsible for making sure work gets done

Figure 1: The five categories of support and development relationships.

Mentoring is a dynamic, two-way relationship that meets developmental needs. Good mentoring relationships should include aspects of both mentoring and coaching-style conversations. Mentors must be independent and free from hierarchies, line management and conflicts of interest. This means mentors are not typically Sponsors and mentoring is not designed for the primary benefit of an organisation.

Sponsors can support and promote a more junior colleague's career advancement by leveraging their position, their influence, and their networks to directly enable career opportunities. This may include advocating on behalf of the junior colleague or improving their visibility. Mentors, in contrast, offer advice and support to help a mentee understand the landscape, empowering them to progress.

These definitions are broad and can be applied in a variety of research environments; they are not exclusive to academic mentoring.

The benefits of mentoring within academia are increasingly recognised. Good mentoring enriches both the mentee and the mentor, regardless of career stage: it should not exclusively be for early-career researchers, but an enduring skill and resource throughout a researcher's career.

To nurture future research leaders, we must equip them with the skills to meaningfully reflect on their own career development and how they mentor and develop others.

Principles of good mentoring

To fully harness the potential of mentoring, researchers (at all career stages), institutions and funders should consider the following principles:

- 1. Mentoring should create space for the mentee to reflect.**
Mentoring relationships should empower mentees to reflect critically on what they value and on their own objectives. Mentoring is most effective when mentees have recognised its necessity and have considered where they need support. By providing a safe, confidential environment, mentoring enables discussion of work-related issues and the development of practical solutions. Sufficient time and space are also needed to build the mentoring relationship and to develop meaningful coaching-style conversations about personal and professional growth.
- 2. Mentoring should be independent.** Valuable mentoring stems from engaging with impartial individuals free from roles as funders, managers or employers. Both mentees and mentors should want to engage in the relationship and approach conversations from a place of curiosity.
- 3. Mentoring should be flexible and adaptable.** There is no single best-practice model of mentoring for all situations. Mentoring should always be tailored to context, for example to an individual's career stage, research field, or personal needs. Different researchers will face different challenges for which they may need different types of mentoring support, for example setting up a lab or engaging with a different sector. Some researchers might prefer to work with those providing a specific service, whilst others might need more holistic support that involves both career support and wellbeing provision. The flexibility should also extend to allow moving on without any awkwardness.
- 4. Mentoring should be recognised as a skill and relevant training should be provided.** Good mentors enable and empower researchers to develop their own approaches to challenges and career development. This is a complex skill and having life or career experience relevant to the mentee's situation does not automatically mean someone will make a good mentor. There must be training and guidance to ensure both mentors and mentees are effectively prepared for and can benefit from the mentoring relationship.

5. **Mentoring practices should be evaluated and subject to continuous improvement, and examples of best practice should be celebrated.** Good mentoring ensures that continued evaluation and celebration of good practice are built in. Highlighting the value of mentoring in professional development encourages involvement, influencing researchers' planning and activities across all career stages. Where appropriate, institutions and funders should proactively incentivise good mentoring practice. Examples of best practice related to mentoring should be clearly recognised and accessible.

The value in supporting mentoring

Investing in mentoring delivers targeted support that resonates beyond the individual researcher. It can influence and impact adjacent individuals and groups, and this effect can extend to their wider network and research communities, as shown in Figure 2.

Such investment normalises access to holistic support and promotes career reflection beyond the confines of immediate supervisors and academic hierarchies. It also nurtures a future generation of researchers who appreciate the value of mentoring and actively seek mentor support.

As well as promoting personal development, mentoring introduces researchers to diverse career pathways and leadership models, expanding their horizons and fostering a more inclusive research community.



Figure 2: The spheres of influence from mentoring: the researcher, those adjacent to the researcher, and the wider research community.

Good mentors provide guidance that goes beyond developing individual research careers: they help researchers evolve into leaders who, in turn, will mentor others. Establishing mentoring as an essential part of researcher development has many such broad impacts. For example, Principal Investigators in active mentoring relationships explore their professional and personal development and improve their leadership and problem-solving skills. They pass on their skills in a group context and create a feedback loop of continuous mentorship.

This positive feedback can operate in multiple ways. Mentoring programmes enhance research leadership and the practices directly influence the mentors' research groups. This increases the ability of

academic staff to induct, develop, and appraise junior colleagues and to create productive and supportive research environments.

It is important that researchers recognise the need for mentorship that goes beyond their core relationships with supervisors and/or line managers. As researchers progress through their careers, they should acknowledge the limitations of their supervisory relationships with senior colleagues and begin to seek other sources of support, including mentors who are not closely involved with their everyday work. In turn, good leaders should recognise that whilst they might advise on personal and professional development as part of their supervision/management of junior colleagues, they ultimately should not be the only source of support due to supervisory responsibilities and their requirement to ensure work is delivered.

Given the potential for far-reaching effects, it is crucial to evaluate the impact of mentoring on supporting professional development and nurturing positive research cultures. This helps provide evidence of mentoring's benefits and drives further change.

Behaviours to support good mentoring

Mentoring is a key part of CPD and an essential part of research programmes. Those who benefit from mentoring today are potential leaders and mentors of the future.

Therefore, to develop the next generation of research leaders, there must be a shared endeavour to equip them with the skills to meaningfully reflect on their own career development and how they mentor others. This behaviour should be supported by funders, researchers, and their host institutions:

Desired funder behaviours	• Provide high-level, adaptable guidance to ensure a benchmark for assessing the quality of mentoring provisions. • Ensure adequate funding for mentoring support, including sufficient time allocated within grants for mentoring and career development. • Provide clear guidance on distinguishing sponsorship and mentorship. • Commit to the principles and behaviours of good mentoring laid out in this guide and allow them to guide future decisions.
Desired researcher behaviours	• Dedicate time to reflect on their career and professional development through engaging in mentoring programmes as both mentees and mentors. • Take time to understand the value of mentoring in addressing personal and professional development as well as short-term challenges and problems, throughout their careers. • Commit to the principles laid out in this guide, apply the skills and behaviours gained through mentoring, and allow its outcomes to guide future decisions.
Desired institution behaviours	• Integrate mentoring as an essential part of continuous professional development and professional skills training. • Facilitate this integration through supportive strategies including, but not limited to, the provision of time to engage in mentoring activities. • Empower researchers to work with their institutions, ensuring they have access to impartial advice and shared solutions. • Build a culture that celebrates and recognises good mentoring practice. • Ensure sufficient time and resources are available to evaluate and reflect on the impact on the behaviours and professional development of those involved in mentoring. • Commit to the principles and behaviours of good mentoring laid out in this guide and allow them to guide future decisions.

As acknowledged, the use of this framework to shape mentoring activity will be contextual. To help on the journey towards implementation a set of examples of mentoring in practice are included as an appendix.

Next steps: discuss and develop

This framework is designed to clarify working definitions, core principles, and behaviours to support existing work in mentoring, as well as expand access to relevant networks and support.

It is not intended to prescribe how mentoring relationships should be initiated or developed. It is instead a framework to guide the design, implementation and evaluation of mentoring practices for researchers, institutions and funders.

Given the diversity of approaches already underway in this work, and the strong focus on development and improvement, the next step towards implementation should be to start a discussion within institutions to explore how the framework can be used.

In addition, those who have contributed to this framework want to ensure that we continue to seek feedback as a community of practice. To join in any future discussions please do contact b.murton@wellcome.org.

Examples of mentoring in practice

An important aspect of supporting good mentoring is showcasing examples that illuminate the diversity, benefits, and evolution of mentoring practices and their inclusion in research activities.

Below are examples of documented mentoring practices. These are illustrative and provided to stimulate thinking and to show a range possible approaches to the issues discussed in this document.

Mentoring at national institutions:

- [NIHR Mentoring Programme 2022 Evaluation Report | NIHR](#)
This evaluation from the National Institute of Health and Care Research reviews their mentoring programme, the most recent version of which was launched in February 2021. It discusses how to define and facilitate mentoring, how to establish and evaluate a mentoring programme, and how to adapt a programme in response to feedback.

Mentoring programmes over the long-term:

- [Evaluation of the Academy of Medical Sciences' Mentoring Programme, July 2023](#)
The Academy of Medical Sciences' review of its long-running mentoring programme (established in 2002/3) includes examples of collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative feedback. It also includes an example of a logic model to display the elements, outcomes, and impacts of a mentoring programme.
You can watch a related video for mentees about working with their mentor [here](#).

Mentoring at a departmental level:

- [Radcliffe Department of Medicine Mentoring Scheme Evaluation Report](#)
This report outlines the mentoring scheme launched in 2014 at the Radcliffe Department of Medicine, Oxford. This report explains how the scheme built on previous, larger-scale schemes and on existing literature on mentoring. It also discusses how mentoring in this setting interacted with other developmental support and includes case studies from mentors, mentees, and members of the mentoring committee.

Mentoring to meet specific regional and disciplinary need:

- [GW4 Antimicrobial Resistance Alliance Mentorship Scheme](#)
Created through the GW4 Alliance, this scheme supports early-career researchers working on antimicrobial resistance across the South West of England and Wales. It demonstrates how mentoring can be tailored to a shared disciplinary focus and a regional research network. This [webpage](#) on the launch of the scheme and this [webpage](#) on the first events in the scheme offer further details.

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