

# Peer mentoring as an academic resource

Or 'my friend says...'

JaneMaree Maher, Jo Lindsay, Vicki Peel, Christina Twomey

*On current projections it could take thirty years for women to be equally represented in the academic workplace. Among the hardest barriers to surmount are the most indefinable ones - the stock of experiences and advice required to navigate an often frustratingly informal professional environment. Yet traditional methods of mentoring by senior staff often seem relics of an earlier era. Here a group of more junior academics reflect on the success of a peer-mentoring exercise which helped transform their first experience of sabbatical.*

## Female academics: two steps forward

Research conducted into the advances of female academics in Australia has pointed out some specific difficulties that women encounter when developing careers in academia. These include issues of adequate research time, career planning and movement towards promotion. The 1998 Gender Pay Equity Study identified an average salary discrepancy of \$439 per week for women academics compared with their male counterparts, with the major contributor being the different levels at which women and men are employed (Probert, Ewer & Whiting, 1998).

Overall, while there have been substantial gains in terms of tenured appointments and in representation in senior academic staff levels, 'women remain concentrated at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, while men still account for more than 80% of the most senior academics in Australian universities' (Carrington & Pratt, 2003). It has been suggested that it will be 33 years before women are equally represented with males at Level D/E and above of the academic salary scale if

patterns of employment and promotion follow current trends (Ferguson, 2002). The persistence of the gender imbalance at upper levels has been linked to reluctance by women to seek promotion, and to women's greater role in the core service provision of the sector (Eveline 2004).

There is also some suggestion that there is a differential in research involvement and outcomes for women and men in some areas across the sector, often associated with lack of time, a more intense experiences of conflict between personal and professional commitments, lack of institutional support and the lesser likelihood of female academics possessing PhDs (Probert, Ewer & Whiting, 1998; Ramanathan, 2003; Carrington & Pratt, 2003).

Research also indicates that new performance measures in the public service that serve to refocus work patterns from 'notions of service to citizens [towards] responsiveness to clients' may have greater impacts on impact on women (Blackmore, 2004). Blackmore has suggested that enterprise bargaining and individual contracts have increased the gender wage gap, instead of 'redefining skill and career [in ways that

are] more inclusive of women's skills and career paths' (Blackmore, 2004).

The findings of those inquiries in higher education which have focused on the key barriers to the progress of academic women have been remarkably consistent. Griffith University's Equity Committee conducted research into gender imbalance at senior academic levels and found that promotion applications by women are linked to supportive Heads of School, personal encouragement from peers or mentors and desire for higher salaries. Among the inhibitors identified were the lack of supervisor or Head of School encouragement, perceived conflict between teaching/pastoral and research achievements, concern with lack of value placed on teaching and 'not feeling ready' (Griffith Equity Committee, 2002). Charles Sturt University found that the balancing-acts demanded of many academic women between their professional and private lives impacted on their research productivity, with consequent implications for promotion (Ramanathan, 2003).

## Mentors up and down

Given that structural barriers across the system co-exist with changing priorities within higher educational institutions, mentoring at the individual level has often been a method of choice for addressing gender equity goals. Mentoring programs have traditionally been built following a model according to which senior academic women mentor more junior academic women in relation to the culture and ethos of the particular institution, and strategic practices for career advancement more generally. The mentoring exchange has focused on 'transfer of accumulated wisdom' and facilitation of the mentee's goals on the mentor's part, and receipt of advice, support and knowledge on the mentee's part (UniSA, 2003). McGuire and Reger describe traditional mentoring relationship as having the following characteristics.

Scholars typically define mentoring as a relationship between two people who differ in age, experience, and status. The traditional mentor relationship is a hierarchical one in which one person serves as a teacher, sage, and sponsor to another one in order to facilitate the other's professional and career goals (Bona, Rinehart, and Volbrecht 1995; Kanter 1977; Kram 1985). The terms for the individuals in this relationship, mentor and protege, reflect their hierarchical ordering; a mentor teaches, while a protege learns. Thus, help, power, and resources tend to flow in one direction, from the mentor to the protege, in the traditional mentor relationship.

Mentors are generally expected to provide instrumental and socio-emotional help to their protégées (Crosby 1999; Kram 1985). Instrumental help in academia includes assistance with publications, networking at conferences, getting one's work noticed, and acquiring funding (2003: 56).

Most universities across Australia have mentoring programs for academic women: the 2003 AVCC report on 'Women in Leadership' identified twelve of 38 institutions as having spe-

cific mentoring programs for women and 23 of 38 as developing programs directed at developing women in leadership (AVCC 2003). Yet despite this structured assistance, the inherent problems of a mentoring model legitimated on a traditional male career profile persist (Quinlan, 1999). The diversity of career paths faced by many women, and an increasing number of men who are assuming domestic responsibilities, remains problematic within this framework. In addition, the increasing prevalence of career switching for both male and female academics challenges the traditional linear career progression which underpins a hierarchical mentoring relationship (Quinlan 1999).

Some more recent studies have identified the importance of peer mentoring, as well as traditional hierarchical mentoring, as a valuable resource for academics. Curtin University identifies peer mentoring as a key aspect of the success of the Curtin Women's Program (Curtin University 2003). Devos and McLean (2000), when examining women's progress in research at the University of NSW, found that mentoring programs may have unintended and beneficial outcomes through peer exchange.

In a recent study, where mentoring formed the basis on which the program was built, the main reported benefit to the participants was the chance to interact and network with other inexperienced researchers, which was a largely unintended outcome (cited from Johnston & McCormack, 1997).

McGuire and Reger have suggested that peer mentoring offers a number of advantages over the traditional mentoring relationship. They argue that the 'power imbalance in the traditional mentor relationship ... where one person has a monopoly on knowledge, skills, and resources' (2003: 57) can inhibit frank discussion of the full range of issues in academic life and can result in the mentor setting much or all of the professional development agenda.

McGuire and Reger also note that peer mentors are more fully able to share the 'increased expectations of publications, service and teaching experience' (2003: 60), which are particularly germane in the current higher education environment in Australia where research expectations are changing rapidly. Our group initially identified its goals as professional and intellectual support during sabbatical or study leave periods, but peer mentoring became a key aspect of the group's practice and its chief identified positive outcome.

## From outside studies and research to peer mentoring

The group was formed through pre-existing professional and social networks in a large humanities faculty, where a number of Level B female academics were taking their sabbatical or study leave - OSP, in the nomenclature of our institution - for the first time. Our group was interdisciplinary including one

academic from women's studies, one from Australian studies, one from history and one from sociology. Previous professional development advice and anecdotal evidence regarding the uses and pitfalls of OSP leave led to discussions of how best to use this time and manage the period for maximal effectiveness.

As well as having research programs to carry out, each of the academics was moving toward a promotions process within the next twelve months, which meant that issues of professional development were also relevant. Each of the academics had previously participated in university mentoring schemes for women as well as having informal mentors within the university. In addition, a number of the academics had been involved in an Early Career Researchers group which had focused on professional development.

After discussion, a decision was made to meet at three weekly intervals, with the focus of each meeting being either a piece of writing in development or a curriculum vitae session presented by one member of the group. The aims of the group were to support each others' professional development aspirations and to provide interdisciplinary comment and reflection on each other's research work. This process was designed to assist in providing structure within the sabbatical which would facilitate effective use of time. Discussions took place over a meal at each of the participant's houses in turn, with the research piece or curriculum typically provided several days in advance. Each meeting lasted approximately two and a half hours.

### **Intellectual benefits – shaping writing**

The process served the research needs of group members well. The rotating system of research presentations acted as informal deadlines in the sabbatical period which assisted to shape the research program for each group member. Interdisciplinary feedback for each research piece strengthened arguments and pointed out possible future directions. Ideas about appropriate publication venues were exchanged as part of this process, which led to publications, applications for funding and research contacts.

### **Career development benefits – enhancing academic impact**

Two central themes of the meetings were strategies for presenting an academic identity, and how to shape a research program successfully towards career development and advancement. The curriculum vitae review aspect of the group's work took on the complexion of peer mentoring from the outset. After the sessions commenced the sharing of advice, strategic knowledge and professional 'know-how' was added as a key group activity. The sessions on intellectual writing provided advice on strategic placement and presentation of research

findings and other ways of developing research impact. Each academic brought different insights into professional presentation and development, and was able to relay advice from senior mentors, or previous experience, which could then be considered by the group.

The absence of an academic hierarchy in the sessions allowed participants to share anxieties, tensions and ambitions without fear of exposure to more senior colleagues. The information-sharing process also revealed that there are multiple ways of rising to, and performing at, a senior level in an academic career. Life priorities outside academia were considered in conjunction with professional goals – something that does not always occur in hierarchical mentoring relationships.

As a group we developed an awareness of different career trajectories, and an appreciation that career progress often appears linear only in retrospect. The capacity of academics to articulate a coherent narrative about their research profile and career choices emerged as an important element in career advancement. This is a particularly pertinent issue for younger academics, who may have several career interruptions and heavy parenting responsibilities in the crucial first decade of their career. The variability of professional profiles, often particularly relevant for female academics, became a key area of focus with attention being paid to shaping careers in ways that reflected individual, institutional and sector-based aspirations and accountability measures. Each academic in the group identified clear and immediate professional benefits in the process and committed to continuing the process of engagement after the period of study leave.

### **Information sharing**

Through information-sharing participants were able to share some insights into the functioning of institutions that might otherwise have been provided in traditional hierarchical mentoring – including induction into and education about cultural norms that are not always readily apparent, advice on how to access information that would be useful, and perhaps most significantly the building of confidence in achievements and options for future advancement. This aspect of the process was crucial, as it has often been suggested that success emerges not only from overcoming structural barriers, but also from examining women's choices and the consequent development of professional profiles. The issue of professional 'choices' became a serious question for the group as each academic reviewed, with the assistance of the group, professional decisions taken over the career course and evaluated the effect of such choices on key career goals and professional aspirations. It has been argued that

efforts to raise the status of women have focused on gender parity in access and only recently have begun to address issues related to choice. Women on average choose from a narrower band of

options, and these choices often translate into jobs with lower wages and occupational prestige (Bradley 2000: p.12).

Acknowledging the multiple pressures that accompany requests to take higher teaching loads and undertake administrative roles, for example - activities that may impact on research productivity - is an important facet of career planning. Our location as women on the same academic level but within different sections of the faculty facilitated respect and trust between us and enabled us to identify local opportunities for each other.

Much research suggests that teaching and pastoral roles within higher educational institutions are assigned differentially according to gender (Eveline 2004; Chrisler 1998) and that the reasons for this may reflect a complex intersection of self-definition as well as institutional structures. Chrisler suggests that some of this preference for teaching may emerge from

the fact that women's scholarly impulses have been restricted and negated for millennia. Women's long history of intellectual discouragement (Lerner 1993) has affected the way we see ourselves and the way others, including our colleagues and students, see us (1998, p.122).

This question of 'self-definition' was one that could be canvassed in the group with greater frankness than might have been possible in a hierarchical mentoring structure.

## Conclusion

Louise Morley has argued that 'feminists in the academy need both to read organisational micropolitics and evolve their own micropolitical strategies for intervention and change' (1999, p.5). This group exercise was not directly connected to the institutional structure in which we all worked, but it assisted each of us to develop our capacity to intervene and shape our own careers with greater certainty in that institution. The benefit to the research program of each scholar was matched by the benefit of the professional insights of each group member which broadened our understanding of our own organisation and our place within it.

While there are substantial benefits in hierarchical mentoring, this horizontal mentoring offered a unique opportunity, in our experience, for a frank sharing of issues of professional development, promotion and research profile. The strategy of focusing on both intellectual work and career structure in turn represented well the intermingled set of activities that constitute contemporary Australian academic life and assisted the development of strategies to continue that intermingling, once we resumed our teaching loads after outside studies. Building research capacity and profile is clearly linked to other activities undertaken in academic life and this process of peer mentoring assisted us to see the intersections and the conflicts between research, teaching and administration more clearly as they occurred in each of our professional lives. The

intellectual encouragement we each gained from participating in the group was one of the best things about being on OSP - roll on 2008!

*Dr JaneMaree Maber is a Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research; Dr Jo Lindsay is a Lecturer in Sociology; Dr Vicki Peel is a Lecturer in the National Centre for Australian Studies; and Dr Christina Twomey is a Senior Lecturer in History. They work in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University and are looking forward to their next sabbatical together.*

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