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Williams, Jane and Purcell, Brigid

Developing Academics: Mentorship in Higher Education

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The city of dreaming spires and other ivory tower establishments are rapidly becoming a dim and distant memory. The 'elite culture', in which the majority of university staff used to be those who had passed through the system as students, graduating through doctoral work into teaching and research has been superseded in many universities by staff recruited from a range of different backgrounds including industry and vocational areas.¹ In addition to these changes, widening participation² in higher education has resulted in an increase in student numbers and greater diversity. The outcome of these changes and developments affect working practices and may require the acquisition of new technical skills. The increase in pressure and competing priorities arguably reduce the amount of time available to integrate new staff into the culture and language of academic life and may result in what Barlow has identified as an assumption that new staff will somehow 'absorb the culture and orientate themselves naturally'³

That this does not occur has been demonstrated in a number of research studies⁴ which subsequently recommend mentorship to enable individuals to experience a smooth transition into academic life. It was such a transition which formed the focus of a small scale qualitative research study that explored the perceptions and experiences of mentoring in higher education for those staff from a vocational background.

Potential participants were invited by university e mail addressed to academic staff within the School of Human and Health Sciences at the University of Huddersfield (where the researchers are employed). A series of focus groups were arranged to which a total of 18 staff were recruited, however individual interviews were offered if preferred. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared with questions formulated according to recommendations by experts in this form of data collection.⁵ The purpose of the research was explained to participants and assurance of anonymity was given. Written consent was obtained to tape record the interview and permission given to use direct anonymous quotes in the research report. Tape recordings and notes made during the interviews are currently being analysed using discourse analysis from which themes will be identified and confirmed by both researchers.

Preliminary examination of the data reveals that participants have had varying experiences of mentoring in terms of structure, process and outcome. For some a formal arrangement was made in which a mentor was assigned to them for a specific period of time, whereas for others it was more informal. Whilst this is reflected within the literature,⁶ a lack of a standardised procedure may actually disadvantage some members of staff. Indeed, for those who had made the transition from lecturer / practitioner, no mentorship had been offered and they felt they had struggled to adjust to full time academia.

Differences in both perceptions and experiences are again apparent in the actual process of mentoring.

'I was allocated a mentor but I didn't find it very useful....she was always so busy...I felt I should have known the answer....'

In contrast with '

'....[she] made me feel part of the programme...even though I didn't know what the programme was'

Six of those interviewed referred to wanting to know 'the rules', expressing a desire to do the right thing, all of whom had received the response:

'you'll know what they are when you break them...and then they change any way.'

Confidentiality is regarded by all participants as an essential criteria for mentorship, suggesting a relationship where weaknesses could be explored in what one participant referred to as a 'safe yet critical space' Within this space there were some shared expectations of the mentor as someone who would listen, support, guide, befriend and orientate to academic life. This type of relationship is regarded as time limited to one or two years. It is however, interesting to note a difference in perception from those who had worked in the university for longer, and who wanted a specific mentor for different aspects of their role, for example developing research expertise.

Of those who participated in the study, the great majority (n=16), reported having a positive experience of mentorship despite differences in the approach taken and even when

'not feeling as supported as I could have been'

Unfortunately, the two people who did not have a good experience both left the university within one year of appointment. One could query whether this can be directly attributed to poor mentorship although for one respondent....

...it [mentorship]was one of a number of factors which made me leave...I had problems with my line manager but it was difficult because ,she [line manager] was also managing my mentor...the mentor didn't have the power to change anything...I felt bullied....[crying]

Indeed retention of staff is frequently cited within the literature as a direct benefit of mentorship, although it is not always clear how this correlation has been made.⁷

What is clear already at this stage, is that mentorship is a complex multi-dimensional activity which raises many issues, not all of which can be included here, which are worthy of further research.

The world of academia is changing; we must nurture our neophytes to ensure that not all spires and towers become castles in the air.

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