

## **K12 Raglan Thursday 6 December 11.30 - 12.00**

### ***Stabilising transitions to doctoral study: finding the reasonable boundaries of peer-mentoring. (0440)***

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#### **Abstract**

High numbers of PGRs experience disorientation, stress and feelings of being overwhelmed as they get to grips with what is required of an 'independent' researcher. Doctoral students can experience many stressors and research on occupational stress in university environments indicates that it is widespread, especially among junior academics. Making sense of developmental experiences can be supported dialogically by good professional relationships, and recent research has mapped a wider set of 'meaningful others', including peer networks, and peer-mentors. One concern though, is that the role of peer-mentor could become inappropriately burdening to the mentor (who is also themselves a PGR under pressure). This project seeks then to define a set of boundaries for peer-mentoring and create a Good Practice Guide that defines the structures, attributes, remit, and limitations of a PGR peer-mentoring approach. We will provide a set of key recommendations to those designing peer-mentoring for new doctoral researchers.

#### ***Doctoral Transitions***

The postgraduate research (PGR) experience is substantially different from the structured nature of undergraduate study. Succeeding in the doctorate requires significant independent scholarship and isolated working, often in parallel with career responsibilities, meaning that transitions to doctoral education can be complex, demanding and emotional (McPherson *et al*, 2018). As old learning and self-management strategies fall away, confidence, self-belief and enthusiasm can be eroded while uncertainties and insecurities arise. High numbers of PGRs experience disorientation, stress and feelings of being overwhelmed as they get to grips with what is required of an 'independent' researcher. Making sense of these early experiences can be hampered by out-of-date narratives of success that position transitioning as an objective, academic progression, that comes easy to intellectually capable students (O'Donnell *et al*, 2009).

#### ***Doctoral Wellbeing and Mental Health***

The workload involved in a doctorate is high, as well as lonely. Doctoral students can experience many stressors and research on occupational stress in university environments indicates that it is widespread, especially among junior academics (Bozeman and Gaughan, 2011; Reevy and Deason, 2014), with a high proportion, 32%, of PGRs at risk of developing common mental health problems (Levecque *et al.*, 2017). The academic culture of high-achievement and high workloads also contributes an environment where wellbeing is more likely to be at risk as PGRs may feel less able to talk about their uncertainties and mental health, and so become further isolated (Metcalf *et al.*, 2018).

#### ***Expanding Doctoral Pedagogies***

Making sense of developmental experiences can be supported dialogically by good professional relationships, and recent research has mapped a wider set of 'meaningful others', including peer networks. Motivation and momentum in the doctorate can be encouraged through informal structures and social support systems which tacitly provide emotional, social, and academic support (Bengtson, 2016b;

Bengtson & Barnett, 2017; Elliot *et al.*, 2016b, 2016c; Wisker *et al.*, 2017). A recent meta-analysis of 23 peer-run programmes for depression in non-student populations, found that such interventions produced significant reductions in depressive symptoms and performed as well as professional-led interventions and significantly better than no-treatment conditions (Bryan & Arkowitz, 2015). Peer-support models can also provide good support for engaged researchers (Gregoric & Wilsom, 2015) and at first glance appear to be simple solutions to the problems of doctoral stress and isolation. This means that peer-mentoring is an obvious pedagogical choice for those seeking to enhance support for new students. Hence it is rising in popularity across university Departments/Schools and cohort-based structures. Helping those responsible for peer-mentoring to use the available evidence-base to underpin the design and success characteristics of peer-approaches (Kroll, 2017) is therefore a current priority.

### *Designing peer-mentoring for PGR wellbeing*

An important caution is that expectations of what peer mentoring can achieve tend to be high and a concern is that the role of peer-mentor could become inappropriately burdening to the mentor (who is also themselves a PGR under pressure) or creep into overlap and conflict with the role of the supervisor(s). Understanding the boundaries and what is beyond the role of the peer-mentor is essential in creating effective programmes that don't simply transfer stress from new PGRs to their second or third year mentors.

This project seeks to find these boundaries by researching the peer-mentoring experience, and integrating our findings with the existing knowledge-base, with the intention of creating a Good Practice Guide for PGR Peer-Mentoring Programmes. We feel that being able to draw on guidance that defines the structures, attributes, remit, and limitations of PGR peer-mentoring, would enable the development of programmes that support wellbeing of both the mentees and the mentors.

### **Pedagogical framing**

The PGR Peer-Mentoring programme offers a space for open dialogue and reflection on the affective and motivational side of transitions to doctoral study. It pairs first-year PGRs who self-identify, with third-year PGRs who are trained in the ethical practices of coaching & mentoring, and the management of mentoring relationships. Over a 20-week period the pairs meet three times to engage in dialogic learning (Wells, 1999) e.g. discussing progress, issues arising, sense-making and the co-creation of bespoke solutions.

### **Research Question**

*What are the reasonable boundaries of peer-mentoring for new postgraduate researchers?*

### **Methodology**

*Data collection:*

**(1) Field notes:** A electronic post-mentoring reflection form is used after each of the three meetings (by mentees and mentors separately) to record their ongoing feelings

about their doctoral experience, and document the content and utility of each of the three peer-mentoring conversations. It asks how well the mentor was able to help with matters of (a) information sharing, (b) wellbeing support, and (c) enabling action towards progress in the doctorate. It also captures participants' reflections on the issues that could not be resolved through a peer-mentoring conversation.

**(2) Exit interviews:** In September 2018, we will use semi-structured interviews (for both mentees and mentors) to collect in-depth accounts of peer-mentoring allowing participants to use individual definitions of concepts (such as 'support', 'well-being', 'progress') with the aim of understanding how they approached and benefitted from mentoring. Each participants' field notes will be used as interview prompts.

### *Analysis:*

A thematic framework will allow us to explore interview data and field notes iteratively and systematically and enable us to compare and critique our interpretations. We will refine findings, comparing and linking across cases to build themes from the data.

### **Contribution**

This paper will develop our understanding of what peer-mentoring for new PGRs can, and can't, support. It will share findings based on the experiences of mentees, and mentors, that refine our understanding of the contribution of peer-mentoring to postgraduate wellbeing. We will present our views on the responsibilities that it is reasonable to ask peer mentors to take on, the impact on the mentor, and how to frame the mentor role as complementary to the role of the supervisor(s). We will provide a set of key recommendations to those designing peer-mentoring approaches.

### **Note**

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