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Charles Darwin University

## Scholarship and mentoring

### An essential partnership?

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## Scholarship and mentoring: An essential partnership?

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### Introduction

The importance of scholarly productivity, that is, research and publication within the tertiary system, cannot be underestimated. A body of written knowledge is the hallmark of a discipline, and scholarship through a cycle of grants, research and publication is an expectation of all disciplines within the university sector. In an environment where levels of research and publication are increasingly tied to tertiary funding, mounting pressure is likely to be felt by all disciplines to demonstrate increased levels of scholarly productivity. While there is evidence to show that scholarly productivity among Australian nursing academics is increasing, it remains lower than that of more established disciplines<sup>1,2</sup>.

Mentoring is often identified as one strategy to increase scholarly output. It appears frequently in the nursing literature as highly desirable, despite a continued lack of clarity in definition<sup>3-6</sup>, and few evaluative studies to show<sup>6-9</sup> its frequency and efficacy. The literature generally reveals multiple definitions of mentoring<sup>6-9</sup>, with one authoritative definition yet to emerge. However, the definition of mentoring adopted for this study was a relationship of depth and duration between an advanced career person and a less experienced faculty person that might encompass personal and professional domains; be formal or informal; and that aimed to further the professional and academic development of the mentee.

The true mentoring process is complex and dynamic<sup>10-13</sup>. In her classic investigative studies of mentoring, Kram<sup>14</sup> identified two broad mentoring functions, those of career development and psychosocial functions. Kram suggests that on both sides, skills in listening, communication, and interpersonal relationships have a critical influence. Such aspects encompass the development of a sense of professional self nurtured through guidance and advice, respect,

support and role modelling. These components suggest the development of mutual trust and reciprocity, that is, that mentoring is not a passive process on either side.

The use of mentoring to promote professional development has been advocated in allied health<sup>15</sup> and academic medicine<sup>16</sup>. The nursing literature supports the view of other disciplines that mentoring enhances career development and the growth of the profession<sup>8, 13, 17-19</sup>. However, previous work by Roberts and Turnbull<sup>2</sup> suggests that in relation to scholarship, a culture of mentoring is not well established within the discipline. Marquis and Huston<sup>20</sup> assert the rarity of experiencing true mentors in nursing. This may relate more to the process of implementing the mentor relationship, since there is an abundance of description in the literature regarding the characteristics of a successful mentor and the accompanying outcomes of a successful mentoring relationship<sup>5</sup>.

This paper reports on part of a study that explored nursing academics' experiences of mentoring in relationship to scholarly productivity. Previous work by Roberts and Turnbull<sup>21, 22</sup> examined levels of scholarship among nursing academics. This earlier work recommended a more in depth exploration of the role of mentoring. A number of participants who were part of the earlier work by Roberts and Turnbull agreed subsequently to share their experiences of mentoring in relation to scholarship.

## **Methodology**

The study utilised a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach informed by phenomenological thought, in particular, by van Manen<sup>23</sup>. This approach is situated within the interpretive paradigm, and describes and interprets participants' lived experiences. Following ethical approval from The Human Research Ethics Committee of the Charles Darwin University, a purposive, strategic sample of mentees was utilised that sought information-rich cases from participants considered by the researcher as highly representative of the phenomena explored. Purposive sampling is most commonly used in phenomenological inquiry because it enables exploration of particular situations or unique events<sup>24, 25</sup>.

Nursing academics from associate lecturer to senior lecturer (Levels A to C) located in Australian universities across almost all states and territories participated in a total of 23 in-depth interviews. Previous work<sup>22</sup> had indicated that nursing academics at Level D (associate professor) value mentoring less, perhaps because their perceived need for it is less. Since those at

Level D were more likely to be mentoring others rather than being mentored themselves, they were not included in the study. A recursive model of interviewing where previous conversations may influence the structure and content of subsequent ones<sup>25</sup> was used to elicit relevant information from participants in a conversational rather than interrogative approach. Questions used were not so much an interview guide but rather a font of ideas used as part of seeking, exploring and eliciting rich descriptions of the phenomenon. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, was tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

To enhance capturing the fine nuances of the data that can be lost using electronic data analysis programs, a line by line analysis of each transcript was undertaken. Key words were identified in each transcript that captured the essence of what the participant was expressing and used as a heading for each relevant phrase or paragraph. Using an electronic cut and paste method, like headings from each transcript were grouped and then regrouped many times until three over-arching themes emerged from this process of continuing re-examination, reflection, re-sifting and re-analysing of the data.

## **Results**

The three overarching themes of the study that emerged from the data were 'guiding and helping relationships', 'negotiating work place challenges', and 'evolving changes within the discipline'. The links between the three provide insights into the complex nature of not only mentoring, but of the organisational work environment in which scholarship is expected to take place, and the competing professional responsibilities of teaching, research and clinical practice that challenge the discipline.

### **Guiding and helping relationships**

For participants, a guiding and helping relationship was a multilayered concept that ranged from formal assignment usually for orientation purposes, to supervision of higher degree studies, that is, one of depth and significance that facilitated professional and personal growth. Participants viewed this level as the one that enabled growth professionally and thus personally. Qualities participants valued most consistently were respect, honesty, trust, integrity and credibility. The intertwined nature of these and the potential of their cumulative effect were illustrated by 'Luke' (a pseudonym), who said:

Credibility and respect, they probably go hand in hand, and if someone does not trust you or respect you, then you're probably not going to have too much

credibility with them either. There's a whole heap of these things intertwined together.

These attributes were seen to contribute to a climate of mutual respect and trust and underpin the reciprocal relationship that is contemporary mentoring.

All participants viewed mentoring as a factor that had the potential to impact very positively on their professional development as an academic, and thus as a developing scholar. Role modelling was seen as a key element, but not something that was automatically accessible within the discipline. 'Gerri', a senior academic, stated: "We don't have the role models, and we don't have the people who are established enough to mentor really well".

The lack of a well established tradition of mentoring and scholarship within a discipline can be recognised in this comment.

The participants' perceptions of the mentoring relationship varied from positive to negative. 'Richard' described the attributes of a post-graduate supervisor who he felt encompassed true mentorship:

He encompasses all the things you think a mentor should or would have. Passion, insight, has imagination, works hard at his job, a man with vision ... demanding in terms of his requirements of me; at the same time he was very happy to back that up with encouragement.

Richard's experience was very positive; however, 'Anya' found she was mostly on her own. She explained;

My Master's supervisor was too busy and there was just not enough time for him to supervise me ... it was really tough.

The term supervisor suggests, at the least, oversighting and direction. Looking back, participants considered the relationship too important to leave to chance. They described helping and guiding relationships of varying depth and duration within their workplaces, yet too often participants' expectations of supervision had not been met within their own discipline. Almost all considered that a strong ethos of mentoring had yet to be established.

### **Negotiating workplace challenges**

Participants were well aware of the expectations of research and publication within universities. While they saw increased levels of scholarship as desirable personally and professionally, they raised wider issues that impacted within their workplaces. These included a tradition of valuing and prioritising teaching that was at odds with the values and reward system

of the tertiary sector. Teaching in itself was highly valued by participants, but high teaching loads correlated directly with lower levels of research. 'Anya' encapsulated a common conundrum when she said:

The numbers of students that we have are greater than the other schools in the university; academic writing on top of that is a really, really big ask ... the more you teach, obviously the less time you have to research and publish.

Achieving a balance between the demands of teaching and research was an issue common to all participants. The differing value systems of the health care system and the tertiary sector obliged participants to choose pathways; either to focus on teaching including clinical teaching, or to pursue scholarship through research and publication. A common thread was the pressure to engage in scholarship at the expense of clinical practice. 'Kate' explained:

... I think sitting on the promotion board was what helped to make up my mind. As an academic, clinical expertise doesn't come into promotion at all, so your hand is forced in a way

Here Kate encapsulates the dilemma that almost all participants described; that of attempting to balance the demands of scholarship, teaching and maintaining clinical currency.

The lack of a research tradition, and thus skills in publishing, presented another crucial challenge. Participants readily acknowledged that writing for publication was not an innate skill but rather one that needed to be developed and honed. The need to promote and foster scholarship within their Schools and a desire for experienced role models to lead the way was common among participants.

As participants described it, the impact of the work environment on levels of scholarship was at least as significant as mentorship. The practice orientation of the discipline, high teaching workloads and a lack of critical mass of appropriately qualified and experienced scholars presented specific challenges for participants to negotiate within the workplace.

### **An evolving discipline**

The move to the higher education sector where research is an intrinsic part of the university fabric has presented special challenges for nursing academics, since their traditions have stemmed from a practice dominated base. A shortage of research experience, skills and qualifications takes time to overcome, and a broader concept of scholarship that recognises teaching and research should co-exist has yet to be embraced by universities. The evolving stage

of scholarship within the discipline meant for 'Jo' that her initial experiences with mentoring through supervision did not provide her with the guidance she had needed.

I came through an Honours pathway; I was one of the first ones at X University. It was the very first one that they had, so that was a kind of experiment which left a bit to be desired, it was just lack of experience.

'Andrew' had been involved in research projects and in writing for publication but had found in a work environment of high teaching loads and constant change, maintaining drive and motivation for research was not always easy. His foundation in scholarship stemmed from positive mentoring experiences:

They came from a traditional academic background and output in the form of publications was just essentially second nature to them .... I don't know that nursing has yet got to that, I mean the culture is there, but it's not there to that extent.

Andrew experienced first hand a culture of scholarship, one where teaching, research and publication were normal expectations well established within the discipline.

There was a perception of a lack of critical mass of scholars within the discipline owing to late career PhD entry. 'Gerri' stated:

I think before we're going to get hugely productive scholarly activity we need a concentration of a certain number of PhD prepared people. Going back four years, we had no PhD prepared staff in nursing at X University, not one.

Addressing this lack of research prepared staff was seen as an essential initial step in beginning to address the levels of scholarly productivity expected in a tertiary institution.

In summary, the results of this study show that mentoring in nursing academia could be a positive or negative experience, with the positive experiences being provided by mentors outside the discipline. There was a paucity of mentoring and scholarly productivity in a challenging, conflicted environment within an evolving discipline.

## **Discussion**

In this study, all participants viewed mentoring as a guiding and helping relationship that had the potential to impact very positively on their professional development as an academic, and thus as a developing scholar. However, the reality was a dearth of suitably qualified and

experienced academics within the discipline to guide them, particularly in relationship to post graduate studies.

The lack of mentoring experienced within this study suggests a serious problem for nursing academics that must be addressed if the discipline is to develop and be recognised as a fully participating member of the university fabric. This paucity of mentoring was a consistent finding, with few participants reporting a culture of guidance and support within their work environments. Short<sup>26</sup> underscored the need for mentoring to permeate top-down as part of the organisational fabric if it was to become meaningful and useful, similar to findings by Brown<sup>27</sup>. In the work by Jackson *et al.*<sup>28</sup>, a lack of mentoring was identified as either the first or second key factor that participants viewed had adversely affected their career advancement.

Mentoring provides a vehicle to transfer knowledge that can occur in multiple settings<sup>17</sup>. The supervisory relationship of post-graduate students, particularly at PhD level, is one example. The relationship is usually for an extended period, and involves close attention that is anticipated will result in scholarly development of the student, as well as contributing positively to the profession. McCloughen *et al.*<sup>6</sup> comment that in the Australian context, the supervisor-doctoral candidate relationship is aligned with the traditions of mentorship because choice is an element, and the key attributes of trust and respect are present. From an American perspective, Morton-Cooper and Palmer<sup>29</sup> use academic supervision as an example of ‘pseudo-mentoring’, considering this as mentoring at a superficial level, however, for a number of the participants in this study, almost the only experience they described as mentoring had occurred during their academic supervision. Others had anticipated they would experience mentoring through their studies, and expressed sentiments of disappointment and disillusion when this did not eventuate.

Mentoring encompasses more than academic supervision, however. Vance<sup>30</sup> p.24 noted that while mentoring had essentially been unfamiliar to nursing, “it was widely acknowledged that gaining entry into the inner circle of leadership, and moving up the corporate success ladder, entailed having a mentor”. Few participants in this study articulated this kind of mentoring relationship, yet almost all identified that they believed a true mentor would have made a considerable difference to either, their career pathways and achievements, and/or their post-graduate study progress.



It is very reasonable for new nursing academics or those who are beginning or early career researchers, to anticipate access to professional growth and development opportunities including through guided assistance from more experienced others. It is, in fact, essential if the goals of the faculty/school and the wider university are to be understood and met. However, this requires more than 'administrative mentoring'. Learning the administrative ropes of any organisation is certainly helpful. On its own, however, it is unlikely to engage staff in scholarship activities. Academic staff who are appropriately mentored acquire academic values, are guided aptly with practical advice, learn to establish a collegial support network, and experience personal and professional growth<sup>31</sup>. Where this was part of the work environment, participants spoke highly of the benefits. This appeared to be reliant upon individuals rather than a pervasive influence that was part of a well established, nurturing work environment.

In this study, the workplace environment was seen, however, as at least as important as guiding and helping relationships in contributing to research capacity. A work environment where staff feel valued appreciated and are experiencing personal and professional growth, is more likely to encourage a climate of collaboration and productivity. Cumbie *et al.*<sup>32</sup> note the difficulties of scholarly output that arise where there are few if any senior staff sufficiently experienced to provide the quality guidance and support that encompasses mentoring. The results of this study underline this difficulty. A workplace environment that has a value conflict between research scholarship and teaching, and thus is less encouraging of research than the traditional university disciplines, is not conducive to development of scholarly productivity.

What was evident from many participants' experiences was that because nursing academia is an evolving discipline, there was a perceived lack of research leaders who were willing to guide and support their staff, particularly in relation to developing the skills of writing and publishing. Strong, well focused leadership promotes a vision that encompasses the full academic role. Glickman *et al.*<sup>31</sup> note the importance to faculty growth through engagement of, and development of individual faculty members. Much of this may depend on effective leadership that provides clear goals and expectations, as well negotiating for the resources necessary to achieve these. The link between leadership and mentoring is widely supported in the American nursing literature, and there is consistency between their characteristics and functions<sup>6</sup>, for example, actively encouraging growth and development in others, creating opportunities and having a shared vision or goals.

In an evolving discipline, strong, talented leadership may be limited or even absent within individual schools. Findings from this study support the view of Russell,<sup>33</sup> who stated that nursing academics have yet to transcend from nurse educators. They also support her comments that the dearth of senior nursing academics with in-depth research experience means there are, as yet, too few who possess the depth of experience and skills to mentor beginning and early career researchers.

In summary, this study has highlighted the lack of effective mentoring within the nursing discipline at its current state of development. Some of this deficit may be addressed by the passage of time in which nursing academics gradually internalise the values of broader academia, including mentoring. Presently, however, strategies such as developing strong research leaders, addressing workplace values, and encouraging early career research training could enhance the evolution of nursing as an academic discipline. This could lead to a development of nursing academics with mentoring skills, which in turn could have a positive effect on nursing academics' scholarly productivity.

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