



Mentoring scheme as a driver of equality, diversity and inclusion in health professions education and research

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring is one of the important modalities that are known to enhance professional development of staff, including those who engage in teaching and learning of Health Professions in Higher Education as well as research of patients-focused subjects. However, while multiple mentoring schemes are available at University level, the impact they bring to the local community of staff is often unclear. With an aim to identify the current status of mentoring within the School of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing, University of Glasgow, the Athena Swan-led Aspiration and Development Working Group has conducted a reflective study. We analysed benefits of the existing mentoring schemes, as well as challenges met by staff in the early stages of career in the Learning, Teaching and Scholarship and the Research and Teaching tracks. Reflection was also made on the equality, diversity and inclusion of Postgraduate Research students and LGBTQ+ members of the community. We have found that there was a limited uptake despite benefits, and that there were multiple causes for this, which was beyond a lack of time. This has led to a proposal of a new mentoring scheme that focuses on local needs and the process that centres more favourably to the prospective mentees, by reducing the hurdle for participation and providing more flexibility in the format, frequency and content, with an integrated monitoring platform of the scheme, which supports sustainability. We find that, for provision of a meaningful mentoring, careful design and implementation based on the EDI ethos is essential.

Keywords: career development, promotion criteria, teaching-focused academics, support mechanisms, Athena Swan

Introduction

Russell group universities in the UK, including the University of Glasgow (UofG), have a strong research focus. At the same time, they are also responsible for providing essential education to the future workforce of health professionals in national health services (NHS). School of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing (SoMDN) in UofG is responsible for providing teaching and learning for future health professionals at the undergraduate (UG) level. This is delivered mainly by the education-focused academics, “Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship (LTS)” staff, working together with clinical academics, as well as those in the NHS with honorary appointment with UofG. Furthermore, innovative clinical and life science research projects with a strong focus on patients and the public are undertaken within the School mainly by research and

teaching (R&T) staff and clinical academics with track records in research. Furthermore, teaching and learning in the relevant subjects are also provided at the levels of postgraduate teaching (PGT) and research (PGR). Finally, health professions education (HPE) has been recently developed as a discipline for those who engage in the pedagogical studies, offered at both PGT and PGR levels. Taken together, in SoMDN, all staff, including LTS, R&T and clinical academics, concert their effort to deliver UG/PGT programmes, supervise PGR students, and undertake research.

Following the principles of Advance HE Athena Swan Charter, UK, the remit of the SoMDN Athena Swan Aspiration and Development Working Group in 2022-2025 was to review, plan and implement the strategy to encourage career progression and to improve developmental opportunities for the academic staff within the School. Upon reflection, we have recognised that the mentoring scheme is one of the facilitators in directing and encouraging career promotion, and that, while its benefits are evident, the take-up remains low.

In this paper, we explored the current status of mentoring schemes, particularly those used by early-career LTS and R&T staff (early-career researchers, ECRs), as well as PGR students, as future academics. We also sought views on the experiences from the LGBTQ+ members of the community to address inclusivity. Next, we analysed the benefits of the existing mentoring schemes and considered how further mentoring can be used to address remaining challenges. Based on this analysis, we propose a new mentoring scheme, mentee-centred and specific to the needs of our local academic community, with an integrated feedback platform that ensures monitoring of the scheme for timely and *ad hoc* improvement of its effectiveness towards staff development opportunities, meaningful engagement and sustainability of EDI initiative and implementation.

Reflection on the current mentoring scheme

Low uptake rates of the mentoring scheme hamper benefits

Research has shown that, in comparison to staff who do not have a mentor “those with mentors tend to be more satisfied with their careers, enjoy more promotions and higher income, report greater commitment to the organization or profession, and are more likely to mentor others in turn” (Johnson & Griffin, 2024, p.3). The role of the mentor can be seen as an opportunity to support, challenge, and develop a professional vision in the mentee (Lucey, 2018). As the mentor does not have line management responsibility for the mentee, they can offer a fresh perspective on a range of issues through their experience and familiarity with the University. As a principle, being part of a mentor scheme is voluntary for both mentors and mentees. Mentoring also gives the mentor the opportunity to develop skills in coaching and nurture relationships with communities across the school. According to Phillips and Dennison (2015), “the purpose of faculty mentoring is to develop an academic atmosphere that mutually nurtures, supports, and further develops all faculty members’ teaching and research skills and assists them so that they feel part of a university/college community” (Phillips & Dennison, 2015, p.1).

When reflecting on our own experiences as newly appointed staff, we have felt that we needed a great deal of support to navigate the workings of a Higher Education institution and to understand a number of

aspects in our roles. Hence, the Athena Swan Aspiration and Development Working Group addressed the status of mentoring programme and its uptake by the staff.

We have identified that there are currently a number of mentoring schemes in the UofG, such as the Early Career Development Programme (ECDP) and the People and Organisational Development (Human Resources) mentoring portal, as well as the mentoring training workshops that support them. The Athena Swan Culture Survey 2024 specifically asked whether respondents had mentoring in place, and if not, if they would like to participate. Despite the mentoring schemes already in place in the wider University, most respondents did not have a mentor and the majority of staff across the academic, academic clinicians and Professional Support Staff groups wished to have a mentor (Table 1). The reason for the low-update rate is unknown. However, it is unlikely that this is owing to the lack of signposting of the existing schemes, as they are well advertised through announcements and web sites. Mentoring is also one of the Performance Development and Review (PD&R) checklist. In addition, concerns were raised that staff on the ECDP scheme have to take the initiative to identify their own mentor in the absence of offers from potential mentors, and this can be difficult for some staff who are ‘still finding their feet’.

Table 1. Summary of Feedback on participation in mentoring scheme (extracted from SoMDN Athena Swan Culture Survey 2024)

If mentoring was available for my job family, I would be interested in participating		Woman	Man
Academic (LTS, R&T and R only)	I already have mentoring in place	38% (15)	0%
	No	5% (2)	28% (5)
	Yes	56% (22)	72% (13)
Academic Clinician	I already have mentoring in place	33% (3)	18% (3)
	No	0%	12% (2)
	Yes	67% (6)	71% (12)
Professional Support Staff	I already have mentoring in place	0%	14% (1)
	No	48% (15)	43% (3)
	Yes	52% (16)	43% (3)

Challenges in career progression and mentoring of early-career LTS staff

Contributions of teaching and learning by the LTS staff and their effort towards excellence, including Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), is vital to higher education in the UK (Tierney et al., 2020) and worldwide (Bennett et al., 2018). However, unlike staff in the R&T track, promotion criteria for LTS staff have been often left ambiguous, or overly ambitious, such that a sustainable level of SoTL productivity is often unachievable. Lack of opportunities for promotion could make the LTS track unattractive, posing a potential threat to sustainability of higher education (Simmons et al., 2021; Smith & Walker, 2024).

At UofG, the ECDP programme offers a clear progression through the universities grading system for both LTS and R&T academic staff with a permanent contact. The current ECDP programme encourages staff based on three key areas known as the ‘central pillars’ of the ECDP programme, which are aligned to the promotions criteria; (1) Research, Knowledge Exchange and Impact (2) Learning, Teaching and Scholarship

(3) Management, Leadership and Personal Effectiveness. The early-career staff training is supported through creation of a Personal Development Plan, which includes attendance to workshops and formal mentorship through EDCP. A senior academic acts as the mentor, providing support throughout the 8 years. The EDCP programme is under constant development, with a recent addition including a bespoke online learning module created by the Digital Education Unit, focused on how to get the most out of the mentoring opportunities available within EDCP. A key element of the EDCP is successful completion of the Postgraduate Certificate of Academic Practice (PgCAP).

Academic staff on teaching-focused, LTS contracts, have historically struggled to progress and develop at the rate of the research counterparts, R&T staff, due to promotion criteria established towards a researching role (Simmons et al., 2021; Smith & Walker, 2024). With the emergence of, and now common employment contracts that are teaching-only, many universities have now altered their promotion criteria to account for this. For LTS staff, the entry point is at Grade 7 and is aimed to help them to achieve Grade 9 status (Senior Lecturer) in 8 years. This programme has been effective by giving accountability to the employee and the University as the employer in terms of the rate of progression and development. It provides a framework through which support can be applied to enable the employee to develop within their role.

All LTS staff in Grade 9 should have PgCAP as a minimum teaching qualification. The PgCAP introduces pedagogical theories, facilitating staff to initiate the practice of scholarship of learning and teaching. Scholarship and pedagogical research are required for promotion of LTS staff. Therefore, introduction to Scholarship is also vital to LTS staff, as many LTS staff come from a research-focused background in biomedical sciences, with limited prior exposure to pedagogical theory or practice. The PgCAP course therefore supports staff in translating their track record in biomedical sciences into contributions aligned with learning and teaching. The University further supports LTS staff to continue formal study to gain recognised teaching qualifications, such as a Postgraduate Diploma (PgDIP) or Master of Education (M.Ed) in Academic Practice.

Successful completion of the PgCAP course leads to the award of Recognising Excellence in Teaching (RET) Fellowship, the University's internal framework for professional recognition in teaching. This recognition is aligned with Descriptor 2 (D2) of the Professional Standards Framework 2023 (PSF 2023), which is overseen by Advance HE. As such, RET Fellowship is considered equivalent to Fellow of Higher Education Academy (FHEA), ensuring national recognition of teaching excellence and supporting academic career progression in UofG.

While EDCP and PgCAP are intended for structured training useful for LTS staff and provide opportunities for recognition of their effort and achievement via RET, this must be done in addition to normal workload. In undertaking the PgCAP, 50% and 20% reductions in teaching allocation are recommended in year one and two, respectively. This is often unrealistic due to the high level of demands for teaching, particularly when starting in a new post, and often requires additional monitoring to be put into action as 'protected time'. The definition of "normal workload" is also highly contentious as many academics find themselves burned out trying to settle into fulfil promotional criteria alongside core responsibilities in an often-under-staffed environment. Supporting staff in maintaining sustainable working hours whilst also meeting promotion requirements in a timely fashion remains an unresolved challenge for the higher education sector.

Preparing promotion applications can be also time consuming by itself alongside normal workload. This is clearly a barrier to those with responsibilities outside of work, such as young family, school runs and other care responsibilities. Additionally, the promotional criteria are not always in alignment with assigned work, this can pressure staff to pursue criteria as tick-box exercises. The generic promotion criteria would become a barrier to progression and suppress the drive and passion of the academics who are otherwise highly motivated and excellent. For example, those who take great pride in their teaching and role internally within the University can find that the rigidity of the promotion criteria towards external output detrimental to their practice. Promotion criteria must be flexible to allow recognition of achievements based on excellence and understanding of diversity in individual's positions, and the promotion process should be streamlined to reduce time burden upon each application.

At UofG, support provided for promotion includes seminars that explain the criteria and how to write the applications. The promotional criteria are intended to be transparent and openly discussed with line managers during annual PD&R, and also with ECDP mentors. The barriers to progression for LTS staff seemingly lie not in the intention of the programmes or structures provided by the University, but by the real-life implication and execution of them. For example, the mentoring component of the ECDP programme is very mentee-led, which may be detrimental to less confident mentees.

Limited mentorship opportunities for early-career researchers

A typical career trajectory of early-career researchers (ECRs) aiming for R&T-track appointment includes one or two postdoctoral appointments, shortly after PhD completion, followed by an application for an independent research fellowship or a permanent academic lecturer position. Postdoctoral appointments are linked to a specific research study, are usually fixed-term (<3 years) and are subject to acquisition of external funding from the principal investigator. Therefore, the uncertainty of research funding combined with the short-term nature of these positions pose significant challenges to the career progression. In addition, ECRs are under significant pressure to generate research output within a short timeframe, which itself limits their opportunities for additional training and professional development opportunities (Chen et al., 2024).

High-quality teaching and student supervision are key skills for academic progression of researchers (Fahnert, 2023; Pratt, 2000). Research Excellence Framework (REF), held every 7-8 years UK-wide, may have led to unproductive dichotomy of workforce rather than the meaningful promotion of scholarship nor recognition of staff's effort towards excellence, either for R&T or LTS staff (Chalmers, 2011; Smith & Walker, 2024). In our University, R&T staff on a permanent contract are required to engage their 30% of time in teaching and learning. Somewhat contradictory, teaching activities are often not recognised as an achievement or priority of R&T staff. This may be caused by the pressure towards research output, with their priorities in obtaining external grants and publishing high-profile papers. Yet, researchers are excellent in providing learning experiences beneficial for cutting-edge knowledge, technologies or products, and provide significant contributions of teaching in relevant courses. They also significantly contribute to project-based learning, which is an excellent way for students to obtain real-world experiences, relevant to their career trajectory, and preparing and securing job opportunities. For the sustainability of researchers to contribute to the courses and PGR/UG research projects, it is essential to more appropriately recognize teaching and learning provided by research staff.

While ECRs on a fixed-term contract are not expected to contribute regularly to teaching activities, mainly due to the high research workload already associated with their dedicated postdoctoral appointment, they would benefit from access to training that could help them further develop skills and qualifications in teaching and learning. There are teaching training opportunities for ECRs, such as the Developing as a Teacher in Higher Education course, which is offered by the UofG, specifically designed for ECRs who have active teaching commitments. This can also provide opportunities for ECRs to be recognised for their teaching experiences as UofG RET Associate Fellowship. This is an important recognition of teaching, particularly for ECRs who may consider applying for a lectureship in the University. In contrast, the ECRs on a fixed-term contract are not typically eligible to enrol in PgCAP. Whilst ECRs usually contribute significantly to the supervision of MSc and PhD students, particularly in laboratory or data analysis, they do not mark students' projects, therefore rarely able to contribute to teaching nor obtain formal recognition.

Securing research funding has become increasingly challenging and it is imperative for universities to offer ECRs with skill training of grant writing. Lack of time by line managers and limited signposting of relevant opportunities are some reasons that prevent ECRs from benefiting from existing training opportunities. While the University funds professional development for selected PGR students, these opportunities are not available to ECRs. This leaves ECRs to self-fund their training or rely on research funds' allowance for this purpose. In recent years, the Network for Early Career Research Development (NERD) was developed in the UofG. NERD is an active network that supports ECRs in building their skills for career progression and aims to address some of the training gaps. NERD events include fellowship and grant application seminars, health and wellbeing sessions, and seminars with invited speakers from industry. These events were usually well attended by 20-30 ECRs widely from the College, including those in SoMDN. This network is a prime example of how a group of ECRs can come together and create a community that can enhance career progression outside of the immediate scope of the assigned research projects.

Networks, such as NERD, are important in fostering an inclusive environment, a sense of community and providing ECRs with an opportunity to establish collaborations and expand their professional network. However, they do not address the need for a dedicated mentor. Therefore, ECRs, not employed in a permanent position, lack the opportunity to have a mentor, whom they can go to for advice about professional and personal development opportunities, beyond or outwith line-managers' capacity and remit.

Instead, ECRs have an opportunity to offer mentorship through thesis mentoring schemes for PGRs. In these schemes, a PGR (mentee) pairs up with an ECR (mentor) from a different discipline. This mentorship scheme aims at providing mentees with practical tips on how to improve their thesis writing process, in addition to standard support provided by PGR supervisors or the University. From the mentor's perspective, participation in this scheme is highly rewarding and often represents one of the first opportunities for ECR to serve as a mentor rather than a mentee. Being a mentor can help develop key skills, such as communication, active listening, leadership and the ability to create an inclusive environment in which mentees feel supported and valued and help them reach their full potential. Importantly, this scheme also provides ECR mentors with skills necessary for future student supervision and application for leadership positions within or outside of academia, therefore it is valuable also for career opportunities for academic leadership.

Monitoring inclusivity of PGR students and LGBTQ+ staff

Measures that support long-term gender equality of PGR students and benefits of mentoring

Postgraduate Research (PGR) studies that pursue degree awards, such as PhD, MD, or Master by Research, have two aspects, research and education. The former aims towards excellence in the quality of research output, such as publications and conference presentations, while the latter aims to enhance students' learning in specialised and more general subject areas, as well as graduate attributes that promote career progression. The EDI and well-being of PGR students are important in PGR practice and have an important implication towards fairness of funding decisions (Sotiropoulou, 2022; Watson & Turnpenny, 2022).

Our School regularly hosts over 100 PGR studies in clinical and healthcare-oriented research conducted by students with diverse educational backgrounds, including NHS-based clinicians. About two-thirds of our PGR Students are female in our School, which is much higher than UK standard as reported in the UKRI-funded PhD student population (Sotiropoulou, 2022). It is rewarding to see that many women are pursuing their academic and professional career in clinical and biological sciences with postgraduate degrees in research. However, female students do encounter challenges that are not normally experienced by male PGR students. Care responsibilities are often associated with challenges in time management and financial concerns, which are often left unsupported, and may disproportionately affect female students (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Sotiropoulou, 2022).

Since 2023, we have taken actions to ensure that gender equality is being maintained throughout our students' PGR journey. Firstly, membership of the supervisory team, which consists of at least 2 supervisors and 2 reviewers, are reviewed at the outset of the study and inclusion of at least one female member is confirmed for female PGR students to ensure they experience balanced supervisors' view and feedback. Secondly, for examination, at least one female member is included in the examining committee for female PGR candidates. Thirdly, maternity leave is appropriately arranged as study suspension. Students are encouraged to maintain contact with supervisors during maternity leave, as it facilitates return to the study and smooth continuation of the study. Challenges are, for international PGR students, maternity leave is limited to a maximum of 60 days due to visa regulation. Flexibility in work patterns, such as working from home at 2:3 or 3:2 days per week, and gradual return to office, is suggested to accommodate student's engagement during the time period of high level of childcare needs. Students are also signposted to community-based support for childcare, however, they are often not accessible, or insufficient, leaving the international students to turn to their own family if they are lucky enough to have them in an accessible distance.

While supervisors and reviewers are mainly responsible in monitoring the academic progression and well-being of PGR students, the recent development of thesis writing mentoring offered by ECRs has had good feedback from PGR students who have participated. Students gain much confidence by experiencing the writing process guided by ECRs as experienced peers, independent of their supervisors. Having an ECR

as a mentor is particularly valuable, as they typically completed their theses only a few years earlier and can therefore share timely and directly relevant insights. Mentees often find ECR mentors more approachable, allowing mentees to feel more comfortable and may reduce imposter syndrome which is quite frequent in academia (Abdelaal, 2020). Continuation and expansion of this type of academic mentoring is most welcome. Finally, for longer-term impact towards female academics with postgraduate qualification in medicine cannot be overlooked, where mentoring is likely to play an important role in supporting them for continuation and progression towards senior positions (Curtis et al., 2016; Salem et al., 2022).

There are two remaining challenges in the current PGR. One is to ensure inclusivity of the diverse student populations of our School, including those with disabilities and care responsibilities (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Sotiropoulou, 2022). Our PGR students are diverse in terms of their age, gender, educational and cultural background. Furthermore, an increasing number of PGR students are reporting for disabilities and care responsibilities. Indeed, challenges in the integrity of the PGR exam and student's inclusivity in PGR has recently been reported (Stephenson & Jackson, 2025). The legal requirements of reasonable adjustment for students with disability is under much discussion nationally. Equality and inclusion of PGR students with disabilities is an important issue, as we observe increasing cases with students with disabilities where reasonable adjustment needs to be organised at the viva. The other is the early detection of harassment and bullying, an issue that needs a strong strategy for prevention, that is supported by early detection and monitoring, which could be facilitated by mentoring.

Inclusivity of LGBTQ+ staff and implication of the wider role of mentoring

LGBTQ+ inclusivity remains underexplored in HPE (Obedin-Maliver et al., 2011). Athena Swan catalysed the creation of an Athena Swan LGBTQ+ Working Group within the SoMDN, expanding gender equality efforts towards the trans community and including sexuality within the scope of these equality efforts. While being a relatively new Working Group, it has played a pivotal role in fostering inclusive practices across the School, with an impact being made in broadening participation, ensuring wider representation and visibility of LGBTQ+ voices.

It is well-documented that LGBTQ+ staff continue to face many challenges across higher education and in the health professions (Cech & Waidzun, 2021; Meyer, 2003). These include under-representation in senior academic positions, experiences of subtle discrimination or microaggressions, and fear of disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity due to concerns about career impact. Locally, there is still variable visibility of LGBTQ+ role models in teaching and leadership positions, which can limit opportunities for mentoring and positive representation. In addition, heavy workloads may also limit the ability of LGBTQ+ staff to engage in EDI initiatives, leading to this work being treated as a secondary priority.

In this context, a good mentoring scheme that, to some extent, is tailored to the LGBTQ+ community can make a real difference, as it may give LGBTQ+ staff and students a safe and supportive space to talk about identity and career goals (Sánchez et al., 2018). It may also help build networks and visible role models to show that success is possible for everyone, in addition to career development support. Additionally, mentoring may help identify and respond early to issues like exclusion or harassment, which are more prevalent within the LGBTQ+ community. A notable facilitator of inclusivity within our School has been the Rainbow Office Hours (ROH), introduced in 2022 as a university-wide activity. ROH provides a form of

‘informal mentoring’, welcoming drop-in sessions where LGBTQ+ students and LGBTQ+ staff can engage about any topic, including, but not limited to, identity-related concerns. The initiative has been met with positive feedback, with participants highlighting its role in cultivating psychological safety and belonging, factors shown to be crucial for retention and aspiration in academic careers. The visibility and affirmation of LGBTQ+ identities through initiatives like the ROH are instrumental in enhancing visibility and promoting equitable participation in academic development (Kelly et al., 2024; Reggiani et al., 2023).

For the future, our Aspiration and Development Working Group aims to strengthen collaboration with the SoMDN Athena Swan LGBTQ+ Working Group, as well as university-wide LGBTQ+ networks, such as the LGBTQ+ Staff Network and GULGBTQ+. Since integrating discussions around gender identity and sexuality within a broad mentoring framework can be complex due to the deeply personal and protected nature of the information, we aim to also support LGBTQ+ initiatives related to mentoring via training and workshop sessions. For LGBTQ+ staff, mentoring schemes can help turn workplaces into inclusive communities of belonging and respect.

Analysis of the existing mentoring platforms and remaining challenges

Mentoring brings clear benefits for career development, inclusion, and well-being. A well-designed mentoring scheme supports both staff retention and student success. Importantly, our reflections have confirmed the importance in recognising the unmet needs of achieving EDI goals in our Schools’ academic community through mentoring. Further challenges that can be addressed by mentoring were also explored. As we summarised the benefits of existing mentoring schemes, we have identified a clear gap in what the current mentoring scheme, College-wide, ECDP, as well as PGR thesis mentoring, does not cover (Table 2).

Table 2: Challenges met by each member of the SoMDN community, to be addressed in the mentoring schemes

Staff category	Existing mentoring platform	Challenges that are addressed by the current mentoring schemes	Remaining challenges to be addressed in the new mentoring scheme
LTS staff	● College-wide mentoring scheme ● ECDP-based mentoring scheme	● Guidance on qualifications towards teaching and learning (PgCAP, M.Ed) ● Guidance on career path and Scholarship activities	● Despite demand, take up rate of the existing mentoring platforms are low. ● ECDP mentoring scheme is mentee-led and does not facilitate staff that are less confident ● Workload ● Time that can be spent on promotion activities by LTS staff ● Promotion based on individual's bests taking account of positional diversity ● Limited number of local professorial level LTS staff

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Early-career researchers (ECRs)	• NERD (Network for early career development) • Mentoring of thesis writing by PGR students as a mentor	• Training for grant writing • Guidance on health and well-being and career path	• Lack of opportunity for teaching qualification (e.g. PgCAP) for fixed-term ECRs • Lack of recognition of teaching contribution • Workload
PGR students	• Mentoring of thesis writing by ECRs	• Guidance on thesis writing and general tips by the experienced peers, independent of own supervisory team.	• Diversity and inclusion, including disabled students. • Prevention of harassment and bullying
LGBTQ+ members of community	• Rainbow office hours	• Normative pressures to hide LGBTQ+ identities in academia • Lack of visible queer role models for students • Isolation of LGBTQ+ students, particularly international or first-generation • Risks and emotional burden for staff being visibly out • Prejudice reduction through meaningful staff–student contact	• Under-representation in senior academic positions • Experiences of subtle discrimination or microaggressions, and fear of disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity due to concerns about career impact. • Variable visibility of LGBTQ+ role models in teaching and leadership positions, which can limit opportunities for mentoring and positive representation. • Workloads, as in other staff

Proposal for a new, local mentoring scheme for meaningful engagement and sustainability

To better support as many members of the community as possible, the SoMDN Athena Swan Aspiration and Development Working Group has endeavoured to develop a new mentoring scheme, with an intended launch in 2026 (Figure 1). Consultations have been made to other schools in the College of MVLS to benefit from their experiences in managing their schemes. The intention was to provide a locally managed mentoring platform, which we can promote more directly within our School, in addition to the existing university-wide and ECDP schemes. The main benefit of the local scheme is that the mentoring is more relevant, and the effectiveness could be more measurable in a timely manner, which also allows adjustments to the benefit specific to our staff, that grant sustainable engagement of the staff towards their career development and in achieving EDI. With appropriate signposting of each mentoring scheme, staff would also have more options, hence improving the rate of participation and overall benefits as a result. Based on the good experiences described above, the thesis mentoring of PGRs by ECRs will be further encouraged and continued. While intervention from the Athena Swan Aspiration and Development Working Group would be kept minimum to observe confidentiality, a clear, basic guidance for mentoring and mentoring meetings will be offered to facilitate the process.

In the proposed new School-specific mentoring scheme (Figure 1), staff who are interested in acting as a mentor list themselves in a Microsoft form with the main area of advice to be offered. It is normally expected that mentors have undertaken the ‘How to be an effective Mentor’ training which is provided by

the Human Resources department of the university. A mentee can contact the prospective mentor of their choice. Alternatively, mentees can also list themselves with key areas of interest, if they wish. The Aspiration and Development Working Group could assist on mentor-mentee matching, if required, for example, when a mentor receives too many mentee requests, or if there is a conflict between a mentor and mentee.

In terms of the format of the mentoring meetings, for the first instance, it is suggested to consist of meetings of at least 3 times within a 6-month period, during which the focus of mentoring and frequency of meeting is to be decided flexibly at the first meeting. The suggested focus would be for mentors to aid the mentee's growth and skills development, assisting mentees to make their best decisions for their career by promoting their sense of ownership. Our analysis of current mentoring schemes and remaining challenges has highlighted that the workload is a general issue, as well as an implication on participating in a mentoring scheme as a mentee, and as a mentor (Table 2). While the focus of mentoring meetings is flexible, Athena Swan Aspiration and Development Working Group would suggest that the workload could be one of the topics that can be discussed for mentee's benefits, and also to ensure that the participation of mentoring itself to not become a burden.

Indeed, for the new mentoring scheme to be a meaningful change, monitoring of the scheme is important. Athena Swan Annual Surveys conducted by Microsoft Forms will be used to gather anonymised information from both mentors and mentees to see how well the scheme benefits the mentees and satisfies the local needs and improving staff experiences overall.

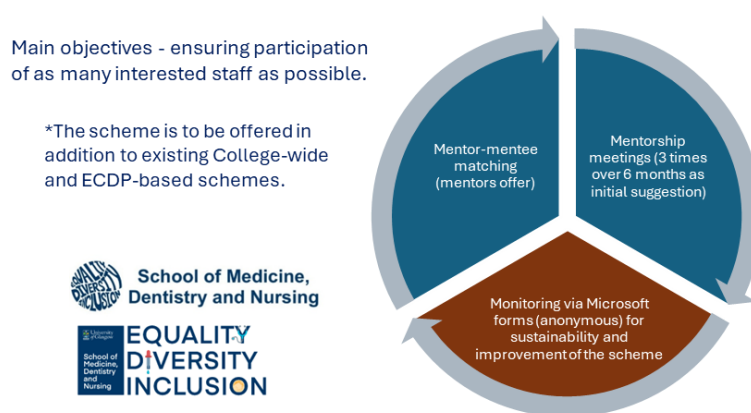


Figure 1. Proposed workflow for the new local mentoring scheme. The diagram shows the cyclic nature of the new mentorship scheme, implemented specifically for members of our School. Monitoring of the scheme is particularly important for sustainability, ensuring participation from as many interested staff as possible. Visual representations intended to promote EDI in SoMDN. Created by a PhD student (Dr Martha Redway, graduated from SoMDN, UofG, in 2023. With permission obtained on 15 February 2023).

Conclusion and significance

While the existing schemes were intended to offer benefits to early-career staff in both LTS and R&T staff with permanent appointments, the gap and challenges were identified in our analysis (Table 2). The new SoMDN mentorship scheme may be the first step in enhancing mentorship opportunities, as our scheme can be also offered to fixed-term staff, and therefore more inclusive. A dedicated mentor can provide

long-term support and guidance for future professional development to all staff. In addition, they can provide an unbiased perspective and a safe space for mentees to discuss potential challenges and barriers. While line managers are goal-oriented, focusing on delivering tasks and completing milestones, mentors can focus to help mentees to develop and expand critical skills, whether that be about teaching and learning, or research. Mentors would be in an important position to provide independent advice that can help mentees to reach their full academic potential in a way that line-managers may not.

Needless to say, the benefit of our local mentoring scheme is not only for early-career staff, but also for those in the mid-career, PGRs and LGBTQ+ members in the community, and it should have a significant benefit to overall well-being and sense of belonging. Mentoring also gives the mentor the opportunity to develop skills in coaching and nurture relationships with communities across the school. Indeed, what the Athena Swan Aspiration and Development Working Group is looking for is the inclusive and sustained improvement and the culture of our School. This is in close alignment with previous research evidence (Johnson & Griffin, 2024; Phillips & Dennison, 2015). We believe that to provide an opportunity at the local level, complementary to those that already exist, will ensure more staff, if not all, would be able to find the mentoring that works, and to provide safe and supportive space needed, for example by LGBTQ+ member of staff (Sánchez et al., 2018).

Our local mentoring scheme does have a limitation. For example, there is currently a relatively small number of G10 (professorial) LTS staff in our School, which makes local mentoring on a subject of G9 to G10 promotion of LTS staff challenging. A general lack of role models for LTS professors may have been impacting on the motivation of early-career LTS staff. Athena Swan Aspiration and Development Working Group is currently looking for a way to encourage staff to engage more with SoTL, regardless of staff categories. Our School's environment is naturally rich with experiences and resources of a variety of teaching and learning activities and therefore offers many opportunities for high-quality Scholarship projects. Our strength would be in the ability to offer opportunities for formal and informal training for SoTL, local networking and dissemination of on-going work to encourage collaborations on scholarship research undertaken in the School, which grants much positive change in the culture of teaching and learning, and research, in our School, and to the University.

In conclusion, for a mentoring scheme to provide meaningful impact, it has to be designed and implemented carefully. The process of developing the scheme has been also beneficial to the Athena Swan Working Group members, as shown by a member's reflective comment "...being involved in the development of the mentoring scheme does give much more ownership and does make me further committed to improving the working environment." Staff experiences are the base of good students' experiences, and vice versa. Excellence in teaching and learning, research and teaching alike, require effort, time, and investment. However, investment of such effort would come back with an impact and reward, if built upon a culture of trust among staff, which is the ultimate goal of Athena Swan initiatives and EDI and the benefit that EDI will bring to the community.

Statement of no Generative AI use

Authors declare that generative AI was not used in any part of this article, from conception, data collection, analysis and evaluation, or writing.

Biographies

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