Finding mentors and role models

Advice from academic and research leaders

- Recognise the value of informal mentoring
- Look for mentors in all places
- Use mentors to boost your confidence
- Don't always take your mentor's advice
- Continue to seek mentoring relationships throughout your career

Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

B1 Personal qualities

D1 Working with others

The leaders interviewed mentioned the importance of mentoring and role models from two perspectives: the pivotal roles that effective mentors and role models had played in helping them to develop; and also the role for them, as leaders, to provide support and mentoring and to act as role models for the people that they lead.

The following suggested actions are derived from their experiences. They may be relevant to you, both as you aspire to leadership, and as an emerging leader.

Recognise the value of informal mentoring
Mentors and role models can take different forms, from formal structures and mentoring schemes to an informal conversation that helped someone see or do something new. The interviewees spoke about how they use informal mentoring relationships to use someone as a sounding board, to ask advice, to learn from someone else's perspective, and to be a mentor to others.

> "The major thing is just talking to them about their plans, just sitting and listening while they explain what it is they want to do and why, and just kind of asking questions to help them clarify that"

Look for mentors in all places
Mentors and role models don't always have to be senior colleagues supporting junior colleagues. Mentor relationships can happen between peers, within a research team, with people from your wider network (e.g., telephone, email or Skype mentoring), and with people in a broadly similar career stage to you but from different departments, roles and subject areas.

> "I think if you're a PhD student or early career post doc you've got to be generous in terms of your own time and you've got to give it to other people to build relationships and build partnerships and build mutual networks of support which will then benefit you in the future"

Remember that "supervising and mentoring are something quite different" and it can be useful to have mentors who are independent of your research. Valuable mentors and role models might also come from different sectors, particularly if you are looking for a new career direction. There is no need to restrict yourself to just one person.

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> "I had a number of very clear mentors that would guide me and offer me advice and that was really important to me."

Use mentors to boost your confidence
Mentors and role models increase people's confidence that they can do things. Many of the interviewees told us that a colleague or someone in their network had encouraged them to apply for positions of leadership, had helped them to see the bigger picture for their research or career, or had expressed confidence in their abilities. Without that encouragement, they might not have known what they could achieve.

> "I think you often need somebody just to push you and say, 'Yeah you can do it'."

> "Just helping people to lift their horizons and think yeah I can do that. I can do it. But not being unrealistic."

Don't always take your mentor's advice
Mentors and role models can inspire people to think of their own solutions and help people figure out what to focus on. Mentors can offer inspiration, share the lessons they have learnt, and talk through how they might deal with a problem. They may make suggestions and offer advice, but you may not agree and you don't always have to follow their advice. It may be frustrating when others don't take your advice, but letting go and allowing people to make their own mistakes is an important part of leadership.

> "It's about giving people the tools to have the insight and the confidence and the wherewithal to do things for themselves."

Continue to seek mentoring relationships throughout your career
Mentoring relationships can be just as valuable in the later stages of your career as they were in the early stages. Our leaders often expressed continued support from senior colleagues, peers, and their research group. This includes the benefits of being mentored, but also of being a mentor for someone else.

> "I think recognising mentorship is something which takes place through the whole trajectory of somebody's career, not something which stops"

> "I think mentoring is about a two-way process because I think you do gain... So I've got a mentee elsewhere in the university at the moment and I think it's an equal sort of amount of what she gains and what I gain from it"

Your reflections on finding mentors and role models

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Management and leadership

Advice from academic and research leaders

- Leading what? Set out a vision or direction
- Focus on longer-term strategies verses short-term actions
- Build a talented team
- Understand how the institution and academia works
- Be confident

Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

B1 Personal qualities

D1 Working with others

> "I think what's certainly changed in higher education in the last 30 years is the nature of leadership which is now much more like line management and much more top down than it was when I started. And I think whether you're a leader or whether you're somebody who's being led, possibly voluntarily, you just have to get used to that change."

It was clear from the interviews that being a leader in a UK university is likely to involve an element of management. Our interviewees were responsible for line managing people, managing finances, leading and developing strategy and policies and of course leading and managing their own research and teaching. Common themes in the interviews included the challenges of managing and leading within a modern higher education environment, the complexity of meeting organisational goals, working with staff with differing contributions and motivations, and balancing administrative and mechanistic processes with the need to be innovative and creative in research. Based on our interviews, we have chosen here to differentiate between leadership and management. We found that our interviewees referring to exhibiting leadership characteristics as being different from learning how to manage things and people. In many cases, it seemed that the management was more problematic.

Leading what?
Our leaders referred to the need to set out a vision or direction for where they are going in order to take people with them. In addition effective leadership often involves discussing the options, making decisions, and communicating those decisions. Our interviewees referred to the need to be prepared and able to listen to and consult with those around them and emphasised the ability to communicate decisions clearly.

> "Leadership in one sense is about it suggests follow ship. And I've always thought that leadership is about having something to lead on. So you've got to have a clarity around why would anybody want to follow you? If you believe in that kind of leader follower thing, and I'm not sure I do, but if you do believe in that why would anybody want to follow you? You've got to have something compelling and whether that's about who you are as a person or what you believe in or how you set out a vision of where we're all going, you've got to have something."

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Longer-term strategies verses short-term actions
Typical leadership and management responsibilities for research and academic leaders include sitting on strategy groups and advisory committees, getting people to buy into strategy, line management, and delegating and working through others. Our leaders reflected on the importance of being able to fulfil these roles competently, in order to open up more opportunities in the future. They also thought aspects of their career progression might have been easier if they had practiced the relevant strategic and management skills before they needed them.

> "In terms of leading research at a school level there's a lot more strategic thinking behind it and a lot more getting people to buy into that thinking and strategy, and I guess if there was anything I needed for the role that I've had to learn quickly [it was that]"

Build a talented team
Management and leadership are often about influencing from a slightly more remote level and working through people to other people. The advice that came through from the interviews was to find ways of working well with others and keep the right people around you to help get things done. Some important aspects of this were around identifying and capitalising on people's strengths, building an effective research team on a budget by distinguishing between stuff that people could do with and stuff that people can't do without, and knowing who can help and advise you (e.g. with recruitment) by getting out and talking to people in other departments, particularly administrators.

> "if you've got a large research group, meeting up with everybody for an hour a week is a big drain. So you've got to look for the structures, maybe group discussions… but teaching them how to write, teaching them how to research, all those kinds of things come from talking to people. And I don't think there's any substitute for it. You have to give people time"

Understand how the institution and academia works
Our leaders stressed the importance of getting involved in the governance of an institution at an early stage. For example, they support and encourage their researchers to use committees to understand the formal structures and to develop leadership skills, to talk to other people in positions of leadership, and to make efforts to get to know the informal networks that can help to get things done. They also recognised that although it is very important to understand how the institution works in terms of governance structures, it is probably even more important to understand and be able to navigate the informal structures. Successful leadership in UK academia depends on the ability to influence others and get things done through them – even though you may not have a formal position of authority over them.

> "It's the informal structure of institutions that make them work well. You have to do the governance, you have to of course all that stuff is massively important but you can sit and look at plans and data as much as you want, you've got to get out and understand the reality on the ground"

> "There is a barter economy and if you're going to be an effective leader you've really got to understand the barter economy, which is that people will do you something as a favour but they wouldn't dream of doing it just because it says in their job description that they have to."

Be confident
Leadership and management positions can be lonely, and it takes a lot of confidence to make decisions that you believe in, especially when others around you disagree. Standing up for what you believe to be right and being prepared to stick your head above the parapet are key aspects of effective leadership – and also some of the hardest. Our interviewees recognised this and had also learnt that it is important to find the areas and people where they can get support.

> "I found early in my career was that I spent too long worrying about how what I did would be received and whether or not it fitted the right traditional model to be looking the right way."

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"It's about recognising it can be lonely, and trying to find those areas where you can seek comfort, advice, support, or just say it as it is"

Your reflections on management and leadership

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Culture and environment

Advice from academic and research leaders

- Create a welcoming and invigorating environment within which academics and researchers can excel
- Develop an appreciation of the landscape of HE and the context within which both teaching and research sit
- Enhance and enable performance
- Recognise the increasing importance of interdisciplinary (or multidisciplinary) working
- Appreciate the benefit that the variety of individual behaviours, experiences, attitudes, outlook and skills have to offer

Mapping to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)

D1 Working with others

D3 Engagement and impact

During our interviews with 18 people in senior management positions in UK universities, it was clear that academia has undergone considerable cultural and business change in recent decades and that this has consequences in terms of work-life balance, management, leadership and the balance of teaching and research. Our interviewees suggested that the most significant shift has been towards a performance-management style in combination with an increased emphasis on the importance of research and grant income.

The following are examples of interviewees who encourage team building, inclusivity, the nurturing of future academics and valuing the diversity of staff in institutions. These are all activities and skills to be encouraged and you should consider them carefully when you move into a leadership role.

Create a welcoming and invigorating environment within which academics and researchers can excel
Researchers are advised to think about the people-aspects of leadership and the amount of time that developing a welcoming and supportive environment can take up. Too often researchers assume that the next stage in their career development is about doing more research, but as soon as other people are involved, time has to be dedicated to building a culture in which people will excel.

> "… structure we have in my team of communication; formal meetings, informal meetings but it goes beyond that, it goes to celebrating personal birthdays as a norm in the team, we have to for every member of the team…it's part of the acceptance culture and belonging culture which I think helps create a good working relationship not just between me and them but amongst themselves, so they're very supportive of each other as well…"

In addition, interviewees recommended that early career academics and research staff think carefully about whether there is a "fit" between the culture of the team that they are planning to join and their own personal values and working practices.

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> "I think when you are looking for a position somewhere it is kind of important to have a look at the people around you. Do you fit in? Do they add value to your research, do you add value to their research? And to think about that when you are deciding on where you want to develop your career. What department you want to be in, what university you want to be in. So it matters on both levels and not only within the university"

Develop an appreciation of the landscape of HE and the context within which both teaching and research sit

Early career researchers and academics need to be able to understand the sector within which they work and the macro-environment that affects this. This understanding of the wider higher education sector was seen by our interviewees as being critical to career progression – particularly to strategic roles within universities.

> "I don't know what the right word is but understanding the full map of the sector, of the structure, you know, with competing and often sometimes conflicting priorities, you know, and how to really approach this and manage this"

Interviewees also commented that some early career researchers benefit from the wider views that mentors can bring which enables them to develop an understanding of School / Faculty and University activities and life outside of the individual research group.

Enhance and enable performance

> "how do you enhance the performance of people whose motivations you don't understand?"

Aspiring research and academic leaders are encouraged to think about how they can motivate the staff and students who work for them. For example, a number of interviewees referred to the importance of understanding the motivation of individuals and ensuring that they were praised when they had done a good job. But they also referred to the critical balance between praising people and having honest and difficult conversations when things were not working out. Researchers are encouraged to see the complexity of individuals and the importance of motivating people whilst also being prepared to deal with underperformance and to have difficult conversations when in a leadership role.

> "I think it's also important to model good behaviour…running our grants competition is really about modelling how do you apply for external funding, how do you evaluate at a senior level, you know, these kind of applications, and by feeding back and explaining… It will give them a sense of resilience and the value of resilience and it will give us better outputs."

> "Praising people, so I think that's important but also honest feedback and that can actually be quite difficult to give that without demotivating people."

Recognise the increasing importance of interdisciplinary (or multidisciplinary) working

Working across disciplinary boundaries was identified by interviewees as being important for researchers hoping to progress in an academic career. Specifically our interviewees referred to this as being the future of academia and therefore very important that early career academics and research staff recognise this and start to develop themselves at the intersection of their discipline with others.

> "I firmly believe that the challenges of innovation are going to come at the intersection of disciplines rather than in the heart of pure discipline. I think there is work to be done in the heart of single disciplines but by and large the in community I'm involved in it's actually intersection of those disciplines [that's important] and I think we've got to get students away from the lonely scholarship of a PhD student into this team environment."

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Appreciate the benefit that the variety of individual behaviours, experiences, attitudes, outlook and skills have to offer

Our leaders recognise that diversity in research teams helps the teams to be more effective and perform better. They also note that this diversity requires the leader to have something other than a "one size fits all" approach to development and support and that this necessitates a set of additional skills.

> "making sure that you can provide them with the opportunities, that they can see the opportunities and where they are, make sure that they have the support, people with the experience that they don't have, a bit of networking, a bit of matchmaking, what senior staff tend to have is a lot of experience, what they tend not to have is a lot of time. What junior people seem to have is a lot of time but not a lot of experience. Now if you can bring them together as long as the matches are there, there is an opportunity to get some synergies and some hopefully outputs that result in some tangible contribution to both"

Your reflections on culture and environment

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Context and methodology

Aims of the project

Academic staff have multiple roles and many responsibilities competing for their time. The development of their early career researchers is something that they often do not, or feel that they cannot, prioritise – often to the detriment of developing future talent and supporting efficient working relationships. Improved effectiveness in the development of the next generation of researchers and academics is crucial for the growth of excellent research and knowledge leadership in the UK, and therefore in terms of the UK's competitive positioning worldwide. Many current research and academic leaders were themselves ill-prepared for the challenges of management and leadership and feel that their "learning on the job" does not equip them to develop the broad range of skills required by the next generation.

The aim of this project was therefore to research into the things that research leaders, principal investigators and senior academics wish that they had known when they started out and to use this information to develop guidance and training materials for the development of the next generation. The purpose of this is to improve the effectiveness and performance of early career researchers and academics as they progress, to assist with managing and developing talent, and to provide HEIs with guidance on how to enhance academic performance.

Although much work has been done on educational leadership generally, and several studies have looked at the qualities of successful academic leaders, there is little, if anything, that has sought to capture the experiences of those in academic leadership positions and to extrapolate from those experiences to help develop the next generation. We therefore consider that this project makes a unique contribution to the landscape of talent management in UK universities.

Methodology

We approached this project by identifying 5 different universities across the UK who were willing to take part in the research. Three of the universities were large, Russell Group institutions; one was a post-1992 and the fifth was a smaller, research-intensive university under the age of 50. Eighteen academics in leadership positions were identified across the universities, and approached for their participation in semi-structured interviews. All agreed and were split across disciplines, ages and genders as shown in Table 1.

While selecting candidates for interview, we made an effort to have an approximately equal split of male and female research leaders, to cover a spectrum of seniority in leadership positions, to represent a variety of disciplines, and to interview people of different estimated ages. In particular, we checked that each discipline was represented by male and female interviewees, and tried to include a mix of genders and disciplines for each institution where possible. We did not ask for or record specific demographic details, as the sample was too small to do a specific analysis by gender, age, ethnicity, or other background factors.

We identified seven key questions to use in the interviews

1. Please give a brief description of your backgrounds and how you came to be at this current point in your career?
2. What do you consider to be the key decision-points in your career journey? What factors at the time prompted you to make the decisions that you did?
3. What lessons have you learned in your position(s) of leadership?
4. What do you wish you had known before you moved into a position of leadership? What would have helped you in your journey?

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5. What 3 pieces of advice would you give to an early career researcher (post-doc / PhD student) who wants to develop their career in academia and become a research leader?
6. What do you do to enhance the performance of your researchers?
7. If you designed leadership training for academics / ECRs, what would be the top 5 topics that you would include and prioritise?

Interviewers were encouraged to probe further as they considered appropriate. The interviews lasted for an average of one hour and were audio-taped and then transcribed. Ethical approval was initially given by the lead institution, Brunel University London, and the consent letter was then used to obtain ethical approval for the project in each of the partner universities. Interviewees were all asked to sign a consent form and anonymity was guaranteed. All documents are held securely in line with the Brunel University London's data management code.

Table 1. Anonymised demographics of interviewees

Gender	Discipline	Role/position	Age (estimate)
F	Arts & humanities	Vice, Deputy or Associate Dean	Mid to late 40s
F	Biomedical & biological sciences	Vice, Deputy or Associate Dean	40s
F	Biomedical & biological sciences	Vice, Deputy or Associate Dean	50s
F	Biomedical & biological sciences	Senior Lecturer or Reader	40s
F	Engineering & physical sciences	Head of Department or Department Lead	Mid to late 40s
F	Engineering and physical sciences	Dean or Head of School	Early 50s
F	Social sciences	Dean or Director of Research	50s
F	Social sciences	Senior Lecturer or Reader	
M	Arts & humanities	Vice Principal, Pro Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor	Late 50s
M	Arts & humanities	Dean or Director of Research	50s
M	Arts & humanities	Head of Department or Department Lead	50s
M	Arts & humanities	Dean or Head of School	50s
M	Biomedical & biological sciences	Vice Principal, Pro Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor	Late 40s
M	Biomedical & biological sciences	Vice, Deputy or Associate Dean	50s
M	Engineering & physical sciences	Vice, Deputy or Associate Dean	Late 50s
M	Engineering & physical sciences	Vice Principal, Pro Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor	50s
M	Social sciences	Dean or Head of School	Early 40s
M	Social sciences	Vice Principal, Pro Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor	Early 40s

Analysis

Once the interviews had been transcribed, the transcripts were uploaded to NVivo. We then performed a number of stages of exploratory and qualitative analysis.

1. *A priori* coding

First, we coded the transcripts in NVivo using an *a priori* coding system based on the questions used by the interviewers. These *a priori* codes were

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