

1. Male, Engineering

MY OBJECTIVES

I joined the mentoring programme for help to form a career plan and get my work back onto a productive track. My main reasons for approaching the programme for this help were to glean impartial advice from someone outside of my department who had experience in different institutions prior to their time in Sheffield. These were important points for me. It was essential to be able to have frank confidential conversations safe in the knowledge that nothing would reach my department. I also wanted perspectives of working elsewhere in Higher Education to help me consider my future options.

THE MEETINGS

With my mentor, we discussed the wider Higher Education landscape in the UK and the nuances of our faculty in Sheffield. This was a comforting experience, as it helped clarify my opinions for remaining working in Higher Education and where the sector may be heading in the future, with someone more experienced than myself and willing to share their outside opinion. Additionally, I worked with my mentor to form a strategy to maximise my opportunities in Sheffield in the near-term.

THE OUTCOMES

Overall, the mentoring programme has given me more confidence in my approach to working at Sheffield and helped me produce a career plan for the future in the short-term. I feel in a much stronger position for having gone through the scheme and it has made me more content with working in my department. Knowing that I'd sanity-checked and agreed a plan with my mentor has encouraged me to abide by it more closely than may have been the case otherwise.

RECOMMENDED

The scheme has some particularly strong points. I found the fact that mentors as well as mentees had voluntarily entered the scheme a tremendously positive concept, because it meant that both parties wanted to be in the discussion. Having a mentor outside of my department also ensured there was no hidden agenda behind the discussions or fear of any information being used by my department at a later date.

2. Female, Science

MY OBJECTIVES

I signed up for the mentoring programme without any strong expectations either of what I wanted from it or what I would get from it. I was still unsure about where I wanted to take my career, and I reckoned that at the very least I would have an impartial, yet experienced person to talk to who was actually interested.

THE MEETINGS

I think I was well matched with my mentor; I felt immediately at ease and able to discuss all aspects of my career situation with her. Yet at the same time, I considered that we had limited time together and I tried to make the most of our meetings, which reinforced my attempts to focus on my career. My mentor and I talked through a lot of ideas (hers and mine), and she gave me advice about my CV as well. During the course of the programme, we explored various things I could do to establish some independence as a researcher and to prepare for possible applications for either fellowships or permanent positions.

THE OUTCOMES

These meetings prompted me to generate research ideas as well as to look for independent funding sources. One thing I was uncertain about was my suitability for an academic position, with the pastoral and supervisory roles that entails. Unexpectedly, the mentoring programme showed me that at least in some ways I can cope with that. During the initial briefing session, we all paired up and swapped mentor/mentee roles, and I found myself drawn to the mentor role. Therefore, I have now also signed up to be a thesis mentor, which has proved to be a rewarding experience that I might never have considered otherwise.

Before my last mentoring meeting, a very suitable permanent position was advertised at another university. I put together an application for it even though I thought I might not really be ready for it. Again, my mentor had a lot of useful advice and it was great to talk it through with her over a coffee. I received a lot of good advice. Some options that I had not seriously considered before are now back on the table.

RECOMMENDED

This is a good opportunity to discuss professional circumstances with someone who really wants to know, but who is completely separate from your circumstances.

3. Male, Science

MY OBJECTIVES

I had two reasons for joining the mentoring program. The major reason for me was to help me in identifying a direction I wanted to take my career. Having worked in both industry and academia, I felt there were many options available to me and was having trouble pinning them down. Having previously had a mentor for my industrial role I was aware of the advantage of having an impartial third party to talk ideas through with. In addition, I was interested in learning more about mentoring with view to becoming a thesis mentor myself, having had poor support whilst writing my thesis, and felt that more experience from the mentor side of things would also be of massive benefit.

THE MEETINGS

My mentoring sessions were very informal – we met outside of the university for coffees, which I feel is valuable as it removes you both from the office environment and makes it feel like less of a meeting. The first session was very much a sounding out session i.e. what am I looking for, what do I do, what is my mentor's career history etc. I found it important to be able to get on with my mentor on a personal level, so this session was much more about that. In subsequent session we talked about the day to day responsibilities of being a researcher, what I enjoyed, what I didn't enjoy and a few problems that arose from the job that I wasn't sure how to deal with.

THE OUTCOMES

I found that talking through the job and things that I enjoy about it really helped me to pin down a few things that my ideal career path would include. In particular, it helped me to realise that for me, having responsibility for coaching and supervising others is very important to me in my job, as this is the part I find most rewarding. This has led to me requesting more supervisory and teaching work from my current PI, and given me some idea of where I might like to take my job once my 3-year contract has ended.

RECOMMENDED

I feel that this programme is really valuable to early career researchers. I speak to a lot of colleagues round the university who all say that they struggle to find direction with their career. Taking advantage of this programme may help at least provide some hints as to where you might want to go. Also, having someone outside of your department to talk to about the day to day responsibilities of the job really helps, even if it's to ascertain what is *not* your responsibility.

4. Female, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

If I'm honest I cannot summarise my specific reasons for joining the programme which made the initial mentoring induction quite challenging. In hindsight, I was influenced by the positive reaction and feedback from others in my department who had partaken in the programme. In addition, I was also attracted by the knowledge I would be able to have the designated time to discuss my concerns, goals and career confidentially with my mentor who was outside of my department and research, to gain a fresh, impartial perspective on things. However, this was a daunting experience to begin with. Although I felt well-adjusted to the day to day post-doc role, to an extent I felt like a fish out of water with regards to developing aspects of my own research.

THE MEETINGS

In the meetings I had with my mentor I felt like I had the time to discuss the things I enjoyed and the concerns about my role and my career. What I found most useful about the mentoring meetings was hearing that I was not the first, and probably not the last to have concerns about lack of direction and awareness of my future career.

THE OUTCOMES

Having impartial discussions with my mentor allowed me to set immediate goals and plans that I wanted to achieve prior to our next meeting. Setting these goals gave me some focus and direction that I felt I needed in order to gain back some control. Partaking in the mentoring scheme enabled me to realise and appreciate my role in a more meaningful manner: I like to help people, and I take satisfaction in teaching and guiding junior members of staff and students within my department, this is a major part of what I enjoy about my new role.

Overall the mentoring programme has enabled me to begin to acknowledge that my 'to do' list is never going to be empty and that balancing my busy lifestyle with my personal life is something that I thrive upon and is a huge part of who I am. Yet gaining some organization and prioritizing my work can be beneficial and highly productive. I have realised that making goals and sticking to them provides me with control and is something that works for me. Partaking in the mentoring programme has helped me to understand this.

5. Male, Science

MY OBJECTIVES

I first decided to approach the mentoring scheme to help me decide on the next step to take in my career. I was considering going forward from postdoc and applying for lectureships and wanted to know if this career path was for me. I did not feel I could get impartial advice from anyone in my department and did not want my doubts about wanting to stay in academia to become widely known, so the mentoring programme was ideal for me. It was very important for me to be able to have an open and honest conversation with someone who had recently made the transition about the pros and cons of taking this step and whether or not continuing in academia would be something I'd enjoy.

THE MEETINGS

After attending the mentoring briefing session and learning more about the mentoring program I was assigned a mentor who had recently transitioned to a lectureship position in a different department. It was very helpful to be able to see my mentor's details form, seeing what background he had and why he got involved in the mentoring program, before agreeing it was an appropriate match and arranging our first meeting. The meeting was very informal which I found to be very conducive to our discussion, and I had the chance to ask all the questions I had about transitioning to lecturer. Simply having the chance to talk about my concerns with someone impartial, getting it off my chest, was a great help and left me feeling a lot more confident.

THE OUTCOMES

I received all the information I needed and afterwards felt much more confident about deciding what to do next in my career. The biggest plus in my opinion was just the chance to talk to someone who is impartial and not directly involved with my work or the work of my superiors, ensuring that I could confidently discuss career issues without fear.

RECOMMENDED

The fact that all mentors have entered the scheme voluntarily means you can be confident the mentor is there to help and not simply doing it as part of the job. Getting the chance to read about your mentor's background and reasons for getting involved in the mentoring scheme before agreeing to the match is also a big plus, and there is always the option of requesting someone else if you don't feel they are the right person for your situation.

6. Female, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

My main goal for getting involved with mentoring was self-reflection and space away from day-to-day duties to form a career plan. I wanted to gain time-out to focus on what is important, explore what I really enjoy about my current role and discuss openly whether the academic career path is really for me.

THE MEETINGS

My mentoring sessions were quite informal and we would meet over a coffee, this created a relaxed atmosphere and made it easy to open up. After an initial meeting my mentor suggested I send an up-to-date CV for review and we used it as a tool for further discussion in following sessions. This was a very useful exercise, we discussed areas of strength and where these may lead in terms of alternative careers. We also discussed areas of weakness and came up with strategies to combat them. More generally, we talked about the reality of an academic career, how other sectors compared and how my skill set could be applied elsewhere. At the end of each session I jotted down a set of goals and blocked out time in my diary to work on them. This structured approach worked for me as it is too easy to leave personal development activities at the bottom of a 'To Do' list. Arranging the next mentoring session also provided a rough time scale to work with.

THE OUTCOMES

Having a supportive mentor has been a real confidence boost. She helped me make the decision to leave academia and realise it as a positive choice, not a failed career! She has been immensely valuable in terms of networking and making a range of contacts, she has been fantastic at making me aware of events to attend and introducing me to key people. My CV/job application skills have improved and I have gained good insight into the expectations of different roles.

RECOMMENDED

I always recommend mentoring to early career researchers, getting out of the lab and your host department to broaden horizons is very valuable. All the mentors are volunteers so you are guaranteed to meet someone who genuinely wants to help. The matching process is important for getting the most out of mentoring so taking the time to think about your application and what you want is definitely worthwhile. My top tip for other researchers, there are lots of opportunities out there, be proactive and seek them out.

7. Female, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

Sometimes in academia everything goes really well for a long time and then you hit a block of one kind or another. In my case the block was emerging right about the time that the mentoring programme was advertised. It seemed to be a successful programme, so I applied to join in the hope that it may help. In joining, I was ultra-honest about what I needed from a mentor and this helped to match me with the right person.

THE MEETINGS

I've been lucky! From the first day that I met my mentor, she has been superb. We have had meetings that lasted 2-3 hours and I came away from them feeling heard, assured, confident, respected, supported, understood – all those things which help motivate you to get through difficult patches. My 'block' was complex to work out, but nothing that my mentor – and many others – haven't been through and come out of the other end! Really knowing this gave me courage and determination to work it through, and enthusiasm to learn a new set of skills that I had not previously developed.

THE OUTCOMES

I honestly don't think I'd be in post any longer if it wasn't for the mentoring programme. It has been superb, and the timing was perfect. My mentor has been like a solid rock, in the fluid and uncertain times that I have faced as a young female lecturer. She has shown me that, as I had hoped, there are ways of shattering glass ceilings, and there are ways of working through difficult issues as one forges forward with her career.

When I first met my mentor, almost a year ago, I was ready to give up and move on. Now I am much more inclined to dig deeper, learn new things, and keep chipping away at those 'impossible' problems. In no small way, she has been instrumental in getting me where I am today and where I will end up in years to come. I cannot thank her enough, nor can I thank the mentorship programme organizers enough either!

8. Female, Engineering

MY OBJECTIVES

After having a turbulent first 9 months or so in the job I really needed someone to talk to and discuss problems with who wasn't one of my PIs. I felt directionless and let down by my PIs and I didn't feel I could be open and honest with them. In particular, I was having difficulty dealing with my most senior (in the university) PI and one of his PhD students. I wanted to start writing papers from my doctorate and didn't really know where to start. I also needed to think about careers options for myself and didn't want to talk this through with people who potentially had a vested interest in my next steps.

THE MEETINGS

In the meetings I was far more open and honest about my situation than I ever feel I could be with anyone I was working with or anyone in the same department. My mentor seemed horrified by some of things that had gone on. My mentor talked through various potential plans of action with me but also kept clear boundaries and stayed neutral. We also discussed writing papers and we went through a paper I had already written and one that I was in the process of writing to discuss my writing style and how to increase the impact of my papers. We talked about different careers options to me and courses aimed specifically at women.

THE OUTCOMES

I gained a lot of confidence from the meetings. The fact that my mentor verified that some of the things that had happened to me were not appropriate, particularly given his long career and high standing at the university, made me realise exactly how bad things had got and that it wasn't my fault or my imagination. He really seemed to care about me. This allowed me to accept my feelings and also get into contact with the union to discuss the issues I was facing. Talking through my papers helped me to feel more confident about writing and my mentor, an editor of a journal, thought I had a clear and concise writing style. My new found confidence meant I volunteered to help deliver a faculty-wide course which has given me teaching experience and I subsequently became a Thesis Mentor which has been very rewarding.

RECOMMENDED

I would thoroughly recommend mentoring to anyone who needs an unbiased listening ear from someone who is totally uninvolved with their working life and has no vested interests. It's a fantastic opportunity to get some free support and coaching for so many aspects of being a researcher.

9. Female, Social Sciences

MY OBJECTIVES

The first time I signed up for mentoring as a relatively early career researcher I didn't have a specific goal but thought it would be good, in general, as a temporary contract researcher on a very limited tenure to have some support in trying to focus on broader goals rather than the run of the mill focusing on the next contract. I had recently moved from one longer term contract to another short-term (8 month) contract in a different department. I wanted a mentor from outside my department so that I could be assured of confidentiality and felt more confident to talk freely about any staff issues.

THE MEETINGS

We met in the mentor's staff office which was a bit of a walk away but convenient for them as she was a senior prof. I think you need to be prepared to make compromises as a mentee and be grateful that a busy senior staff member is prepared to undertake mentoring. Sometimes we had to cancel and rearrange but we were both very good at keeping each other informed and abreast of changes, which is a basic courtesy in this kind of relationship.

THE OUTCOMES

I think my mentor was helpful in trying to get me to think more widely about how I could be proactive in trying to develop my future career e.g. making contacts with networks which might be useful for joint bids in the future. I made some contacts, they didn't come to anything, but it made me think more widely.

However, I think I found it most useful to have a sounding board about a situation at work where I was working with a research assistant who I was temporarily supervising, who was not very good at her job, but was favoured by the PI on the team, and how I could best manage that situation. I found it very helpful having a confidential space to talk through that situation with someone experienced in staff matters who was not my PI and outside the team/dept.

Continued in Case Study 10.

10. Female, Social Sciences

MY OBJECTIVES

I picked up mentoring again on the recommendation of the PI in a subsequent contract, who thought it would help me better understand how things worked in that department/area of research. However, somewhat ironically it was the shocked reaction of my mentor when I told her about some of my concerns about the way the PI was running the project (ethics procedure, employment practice etc.) that gave me the confidence to approach the 'Working Better Together' representative in the department and air my concerns.

THE MEETINGS

This mentor was more senior than me and was open to meeting outside the department off-site, which was quite good as sometimes what I was relaying was quite stressful and it was good to be away from base (although you have to be a bit careful re confidentiality in coffee bars near to campus!).

THE OUTCOMES

I told my mentor about my concerns about the way the PI was running the project and through this I gained the confidence to air my concerns. Basically I was put in a position of keeping my mouth shut or rocking the boat and risking not getting future contracts – which is ultimately the vulnerable position that a lot of contract researchers are in, sadly.

Having a mentor was instrumental in supporting me to take up these issues, which were also of concern to other members of the same team. I'm not sure how much power the 'Working Better Together' team from HR have in these situations, but it would have compromised my personal integrity as a professional researcher not to raise some of the issues concerned.

RECOMMENDED

I would recommend the mentoring service to anyone wishing to develop their academic career, and particularly to early career researchers moving from contract to contract who may have different issues to deal with and may not know how to handle what is thrown at them. It is always helpful to have an outside, more experienced perspective on things and there are quite a few big egos and complex personalities to deal with in academia.

11. Male, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

My objective for mentoring was to help give my career direction. I felt like I was coasting along without really know where I was going – especially as I'd managed to become unemployed for 6 months between two 3-year contracts and I really didn't want that to happen again. I had some unclear, ill-defined ideas about my future and I wanted help deciding what was realistic.

THE MEETINGS

The meetings were hard. I told my mentor what I'd been telling myself I wanted – to apply for fellowships. We talked about what I'd done to achieve this, and how I planned to to achieve it. This was really uncomfortable because I had to admit I'd done no thinking at all. We chatted about what I would need to do to get a fellowship and created a plan for me to go away and do this thinking and come back to the next meeting with something to discuss. The rest of the meetings were similar, they helped me to make time to do the hard thinking because I didn't feel I could turn up with nothing.

My mentor wasn't unkind but she was straight with me, I didn't have any idea what I was going to do next, simply because I hadn't thought about it. I couldn't go on any courses that could answer this for me, no matter how good they were. This made it clear to me that I couldn't escape doing my own hard thinking.

THE OUTCOMES

The clearest outcome was realising that I didn't actually want to do a fellowship. I didn't want to put the massive amount of work in, not through laziness, but because the thought of becoming an academic didn't motivate me. I realised I wanted to do something else. We talked about what I enjoyed and whether I wanted to take the well-trodden route to industry or go somewhere else entirely. I didn't work this out during the mentoring sessions and we finished the relationship after 3 sessions because the massive monkey had been removed from my back, I was open to so much more and I didn't need help doing the thinking any more. I suppose, if I hadn't found what I wanted to do I could have gone back to mentoring, but I did find it so there was no need.

RECOMMENDED

I would heartily recommend mentoring, I don't think you can predict what you'll get out of it whether it's something that's simple or something that takes a lot of work but it's definitely worth the time finding out what the right path for you is!

12. Female, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

I joined the mentoring programme mainly to gain a broader perspective on my future career; whether to remain in academia or choose to leave, and to ensure my CV supported both options. I was aware of gaps in my CV, mainly through lack of publications, and wanted to know how I could still make myself look attractive to future employers, by furthering my teaching, public engagement, and managerial experience. I wanted to gain an unbiased opinion of my future career prospects, as well as advice from an impartial person, who is experienced in this area. I wasn't sure which route I wanted to take, and with fellowship deadlines creeping up without you knowing, I needed more information so I could decide where I want my future to go in science and research. I also had trouble saying 'no' to things, and needed help with prioritising what I really needed to do that would add to my CV productively.

THE MEETINGS

The meetings were informal, and just felt like a chat between two people having a coffee and sharing stories. My mentor always asked how I was doing and how I was getting on with decisions and putting into practice techniques that were suggested at previous meetings. We discussed what main points my CV needed so that I didn't take on more work where I already had plenty of examples of this skill. We also focused on the pros and cons of remaining in academia, but also what leaving and working in industry would mean, and how these factors worked with my desires and lifestyle. She enlightened me to many schemes that would be beneficial, and improve my opportunities no matter what career I chose in the future, as the skills would be transferable.

THE OUTCOMES

At the end of each meeting, we listed some tasks and things for me to look into, that would help me to be clearer on what I could and couldn't do, but more importantly, helped me to see what I wanted to do. I have now become a thesis mentor, and written several projects that will enhance my teaching experience, as well as becoming an outreach coordinator for my staff association, to further my abilities in these areas. My research is on good track, and I am finally in the process of writing a paper, after struggling with this whole process before the meetings started. At the beginning of these sessions, I was stressed and worried and honestly, a bit clueless about how I was going to get to my next career step, but now I feel a lot better and clearer about how I'm going to get to where I want to be.

RECOMMENDED

I would highly recommend this scheme to any early career researcher, regardless of whether you think you're sure about what you are doing/want to do, or you feel completely lost. Talking it through with another professional, who is impartial but has actually put themselves forward as someone who wants to help was extremely helpful, and while highlighting your strengths, they will also constructively help you to see how you can rectify a situation, and feel more at ease and successful in your career.

13. Male, Engineering

MY OBJECTIVES

Towards the end of my PhD I realised that I did not want to be a career academic: I was put off by the lack of job opportunity as a postdoc, the competition for tenure and the fierce workloads of lecturers. I began to think about alternative career paths that might allow me to combine my interest in software engineering, systems administration, teaching and working with other researchers. I began trying to get to know others at the university also interested in helping others use/write research software and manage research data but was lacking in confidence to make a change. I therefore signed up to the programme to discuss career options and the viability of a lateral move.

THE MEETINGS

I was paired up with a mentor who had recently returned to academia after many years of working for a very large software company. We met in cafes on/near campus and I found him very easy to talk to. It was interesting comparing notes on the differences between working in industry and academia, along with the differing challenges for those writing software in academia and industry. I was able to talk freely about my career aspirations, knowing that my mentor had no vested interest in me continuing with an academic career. He gave me further confidence that my ideas were realistic, that there is a need for better research IT support in academia and also suggested several places in the city that might be want to hire someone with my skills. We only met twice as my circumstances then changed...

THE OUTCOMES

After just under a year of postdoc work I have moved into research support position within university IT Services. This has the desired mix of both technical and user-facing components and I'm very happy with the move.

RECOMMENDED

Talking through your career options with someone in academia other than your PI can be very useful if you have questions about your current position and future opportunities. I was lucky in that I was able to be candid with my PI about my plans but know others may jeopardize their relationship with their PI and/or others in their group by being too honest about wanting a change. My suggestion to anyone considering applying to be mentored through this scheme would be not to completely forgo formality during each meeting: I think I would have gotten more from my meetings had I gone in with a set of agenda points.

14. Male, Arts & Humanities

MY OBJECTIVES

The main reason I initially wanted to join the mentoring programme was to get advice on how to develop my academic career from someone who was well-established in their own. I was looking for guidance about the key steps to take and the goals to set in order to become an independent and successful researcher. However, as I entered the process and upon my first discussion with my mentor my main objectives changed. I was thinking of submitting a fellowship application and the timings of the funding stream I was targeting fit in well with the scheduled meetings with my mentor. I therefore agreed with my mentor to use the programme to help develop and refine my fellowship application.

THE MEETINGS

We spent subsequent meetings working through important aspects of the application such as the Case for Support and the Pathways to Impact. My mentor was able to provide excellent advice, and the meetings provided some structure and timescales to build the development of the fellowship application around. We used the meetings to discuss general issues to do with the application, as well as working through specific text and ideas to be included in the application.

THE OUTCOMES

Although the mentoring process has officially come to an end, my mentor is still providing support with the development of my fellowship. Her advice and observations about the fellowship have given me a fresh outlook on how to approach the application. The whole mentoring process has helped ensure the application has developed in a timely and well-structured way, and has provided me with added motivation to keep the application on track and to schedule. My mentor's experience in successfully applying to and being a reviewer for the funder has also been extremely helpful.

RECOMMENDED

I have found the mentoring process extremely beneficial. Its flexibility, allowing the mentor and mentee to shape the programme to fit with their needs, has allowed me to get maximum benefit from it. It is also great that the mentor is providing this support voluntarily, her desire to help is illustrated by the fact we have continued our partnership. A further benefit of the programme is a result of the mentor being from a different department to me providing an alternative perspective on my application, and making me consider issues that I would likely not have thought of without the inter-disciplinary discussions we have had. This is especially useful given that the funding application is likely to be reviewed by people outside my own discipline.

15. Female, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

I joined the program at a very stressful time, with the objective of trying to understand why everything seemed to spin in the same place, not moving forward. I was determined to take the time to explore all my career options, and see if academia was the right path for me.

THE MEETINGS

With my mentor, we discussed the source of stress, how to focus on the bigger picture while still working on the details, we explored the different paths that I could try out and eventually pursue. This helped me a lot reorganize my thoughts, have a clearer idea of what I would like to do in the future and most importantly, that it can be achieved in many different ways.

THE OUTCOMES

This program has helped me produce a long term and short term career plan, which allowed me to take on opportunities I would otherwise have missed. I am also more confident in the path I have chosen, and already started paving the way to achieving my career goals.

RECOMMENDED

Every early career researcher should make use of this program, the earlier the better, as it will help them make the most out of their time at the University of Sheffield.

16. Female, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

My main objective when joining the programme as a mentee was to determine my next move. I hoped that being able to talk through my thought processes would enable me to do this. I also wanted to ensure that I actively made progress towards my next steps by having someone to regularly report to.

THE MEETINGS

I met with my mentor once every four weeks. The meetings provided me with an uninterrupted hour with an objective person, where my issues were the sole focus of attention. This is something that is very difficult to come across otherwise. Friends, family and colleagues often do not have the time and can be unsuitable. My mentor was very well matched to me, having experience in the industry I was thinking of moving into, which I had mentioned on the initial mentoring form. My mentor shared her experiences and was very encouraging about my possible transition out of academia. Through our discussions, I began to be honest with myself and realized that I actually wanted to go down a different route. My mentor was completely supportive, expressing no judgement about my change of mind and was encouraging about the new direction.

THE OUTCOMES

As a result of the mentoring, I realized what I did *not* want to do. This enabled me to start focusing on what I *would* like to do. Since my participation in the programme finished, I have determined the sort of role I am interested in. I have been researching opportunities and working towards making applications.

RECOMMENDED

I would recommend joining the programme to anyone who is trying to determine their next move but is finding it difficult to sit down and clarify their thoughts. Once a part of the programme, it is important to have honest discussions to get the best outcome.

17. Female, Medicine, Dentistry & Health

MY OBJECTIVES

I wanted to gain more information from a senior source to help me make the decision as to whether to stay in my current role or apply for lectureships at other institutions (the chance of a vacancy in my current department is very slim). This is a difficult decision for me because, although I am not in the role that I ultimately want to be in, I enjoy my job and really enjoy working in my department and in the University, and get a lot from it.

THE MEETINGS

My mentor talked me through some of the options, including some of the things I could do in my current role and how I could tailor it more to meet my needs, as well as how I could build up experience (and confidence) to make applications when the time feels right. My mentor was also extremely helpful in helping me to refine my research ideas and give me a better idea of what I could focus on. We talked through some of the options for helping me gain more independence in my research and discussed some possibilities.

THE OUTCOMES

I realise now that I have many more options at my disposal, compared with the simple binary choice I thought I was faced with. I have more confidence and direction in my research now and the mentoring has helped me to gain a 'bigger picture' over my research direction and expertise. It has also given me more confidence to branch out and collaborate with other parties in the interests of conducting research and building up a research profile.

RECOMMENDED

I would recommend the mentoring programme for anyone who feels they are at a crossroads or are facing difficult decisions about the future. It is helpful just to take that time out from the hustle and bustle of research life (and teaching!) to talk over career options with someone more senior and to keep an eye on the bigger picture as well as the day to day things.

18. Male, Engineering

MY OBJECTIVES

I approached the mentoring scheme after a previous past postdoctoral position where I realised that your PI's interests do not always overlap with yours. Unfortunately it is difficult to know whether this is the case or not until towards the end of the project, then it is too late. So I wanted to have the support of an advisor to help me balance my interests with my project commitments, for both the day to day work and for the long term career perspectives. I've always been convinced that career wise it is better to be lucky than skilled. This translates into getting the influential PIs, wealthy laboratories and timely research themes. Having experienced little of any of these, I wanted a mentor who could teach me how to thrive in the system. I wanted to learn how to do it.

THE MEETINGS

I can only say that time flew. The first meetings were exploratory on both sides. I stated my objectives and the mentor was happy about helping in pursuing them. It didn't take long to understand the mentor was the kind of person I've asked for. Moreover the small age difference helped the conversation. It started with considering my options and helping me to understand my current position, the reach I could have from there and expectations of the university. The conversation developed into identifying key objectives to pursue but I was never given deadlines or a schedule to progress. It was up to me and at each meeting we were discussing what had happened since the previous time and what to do in the following month. I was always driving it.

THE OUTCOMES

I must say mentoring itself didn't change my life yet, but this was my choice. I had, and still have, the opportunity to go down career routes that emerged from our conversations, however it is up to me. The mentor did their job. From our discussion some alternative approaches emerged, but these are probably too disruptive to be tried at my career stage. I have decided to store them and pull them out towards reaching my targets later in my career. In the meanwhile I have new company for coffee breaks and this is somebody who knows enough about me to provide advice if asked, even outside the formal programme.

RECOMMENDED

I would certainly recommend the mentoring programme. It is an opportunity to speak about your career with somebody not driven by their interests when providing advice. At the same time the mentor is well within the system, and ideally placed to provide sensible advice. There is not one single way to achieve your target but, if you have only known how to hammer nails, you will keep looking for a hammer, even if there were no nails around.

19. Male, Science

MY OBJECTIVES

I wanted to talk through my thoughts about 'where next' with an independent person who may have oversight, knowledge or connections that complemented mine, but would not feel inclined to try to influence my decision with what's best for them. I have built my own research area that's very independent from my PI. Still I have work here to do on projects that gain him credit as well as the ones that enhance my own CV. This year I really felt the switch to a mindset where I wanted to look out at what next for me, but exactly what/where that role is...was uncertain – too many options.

THE MEETINGS

Trying to meet and access new people across the university, you could be searching through patchy/out of date web profiles forever. When I saw the mentoring programme would effectively be a dating agency to help me meet my wish list I jumped at the chance to have someone else do the searching! It was a great match (that's half the success, getting the right person). My mentor said at the start – how do you want this to go and from that point I relaxed, and felt I was in control of the partnership. We met in cafes, offices, it didn't matter where, it mattered that each time it was more than a chat, it had a beginning, middle, end, and I got actions to take away.

THE OUTCOMES

I met a new ally and I realised that people in senior jobs can still (and did always) have family time, do their sport, have a life, etc. What was keeping me down was in my head, an idea that to have the lectureship you needed to exclude everything else and commit 100% to a job. Now I know that it's not the case (yes it's hard but not 100%) I can imagine myself there. Getting that option back on the table has really made a difference to how I'm approaching saying yes or no to pieces of work

RECOMMENDED

Mentoring for me got some options I had excluded back on the table and made me think better of myself. A lot has changed in how I approach my work, I feel calmer. If you want to have some time to talk about yourself and make some decisions for you instead of for others then it's for you. The matching is critical and so be really clear about what you want, you can be honest, it's confidential.

20. Male, Social Science

MY OBJECTIVES

My research had moved paths significantly in the last year. I was recruited into a dept. as an expert in a particular area and I'm now working in a way where I am really a consulting expert on many projects that need input from my background specialism. The challenges are not losing my sense of independence and my own research to more and more 'other people's project' demands. Also due to this set up, there is not much locally available discussion/debate about my specialism, I have to get out and be creative to meet others in my field.

THE MEETINGS

It was important to be able to meet a person who was there in a specific 'job description' – meaning not 'senior lecturer' but 'mentor' with a defined way of interacting. I can chat to my family, my friends, but a mentor isn't a friend, they are there to get you to do a piece of work that is hard, and so you need a combination of a prison guard and a cheerleader so you don't let yourself not do it.

THE OUTCOMES

I did things instead of saying I was going to do things and then not 'finding time', I put in a book proposal (rejected, but now I know how that process works) two papers (one accepted so far) and a small grant (waiting to see). I would not have found the energy to do any of this without someone believing I can. The most important thing though was that someone was listening and my plans didn't sound outrageous. At the start I was like 'maybe I'll write a paper' at the end I was like 'I want to be a professor and this is my publication plan' Well, we'll see.

RECOMMENDED

Don't do what I did for so many years and just avoid doing the hard thinking because... it's hard. Once you learn to take control and face your issues, something changes for you and you take on a new way of doing lots of things. I would say that if you are ready for a change and to face up to what's coming anyway, mentoring is for you.