The New Researchers – Project Management

Successful completion

It is very important to frame the mentoring relationship on the objective of project completion, for two good reasons.

1. Taking the project all the way through to completion, write up and publication engages the new researcher with each phase of managing research.

2. One of the most important skills the new researcher must learn is to complete on time. It is a critical test upon which accessing further funding is balanced.

The mentoring relationship

In May of each year, the new researchers are paired with a mentor for the year ahead.

The new researchers have had the benefit of two days within the VU community of practice

Their mentors will be a source of advice and support for each stage of their research projects.

We ask the mentors to have four face-to-face formal sessions with the researchers and use telephone calls and e-mails.

For the new researchers their project is the vehicle for their learning throughout the year. Each stage will be part of the learning process.

Mentors help the new researchers think decisions through and guide them to sources of knowledge they may need. Practically, mentors review and critique the project specifications, the literature reviews, the data collection proposal, draft analysis and draft write-ups.

We hope that the new researchers learn as the project progresses, and that they will be able to present and publish the results of the studies to the VET community.

This is not higher degree supervision. It is about supporting the first steps in a modest locally focused project that is supported by the researcher's employer. The most important issue is that the project is simply a vehicle for the new researchers to learn about the research process. It is vital that we guide them through each phase to complete the process of learning.

We will use teleconferences between mentors to bring the mentors together and share dilemmas and practices.

Managing the mentoring relationship

Some key learning issues about the mentoring process are worth reviewing from our experiences so far:

Early contact – Successful relationships begin with a formal early meeting where the researcher is able to put the draft specification of their project before the mentor for discussion. I would urge all mentors to initiate and early first meeting and to get their new researcher to table the most up to date project specification as the basis for that meeting. The formal contact should be completed at that meeting.

Regular meeting dates – At the first meeting, it is a good idea to pencil in the next three dates for meeting and review the timeline for the project using the guide attached to this mail.

Early intervention – If at any time the researcher is falling well behind the draft timeline for the project it is important to alert Llandis to the situation. It is important to get to the data collection phase before potential subjects of the research disappear over the Christmas/holiday season.

Responsiveness – Experience has shown that a brief early response to the researchers is the most effective supporting action. Mentors have often focused on quick and focused responses to the researchers rather than more detailed responses weeks later.

Knowing what the outcome looks like – This year we have the advantage of completed projects to show and discuss with the researchers. I will circulate some to the mentoring group.

Knowing what the mentoring role is about – This year we have learned that while a mentoring role is about supporting, planning and providing network links for knowledge building, we can be clearer about the actions that mentors have taken with their new researchers during the year:

> Critiquing and developing the project specification
> Focusing effort on a 'doable' project
> Planning the timeline for the year ahead
> Responding to research and personal dilemmas
> Suggesting relevant and basic literature sources
> Recommending network contact for field research
> Suggesting the formats of instruments and target numbers for the limited data collection
> Helping to structure an interim project report for the new researcher's employer
> Suggesting possible analysis phases
> Discussing and suggesting the structure of the project write-up
> Reviewing draft material
> Advising on the use of the NCVER template
> Advising on the structure and goals of conference papers for AVETRA (April) and NCVER No-frills (July)

Acting as a first editor for these papers

Managing the balance between the completion of the project report and the desire to present at a conference

Ensuring the new researcher's institute or employer is happy with the draft text.

The initial meeting

It is important to establish the basis of the relationship. Mentors are not able to do the project or carry out a program of research instruction. They are able to help new researchers plan and reflect, act as a critical friend and give support, and point you in the right direction to explore the knowledge sources you require.

It is good idea to begin by reviewing the possible roles and negotiating where the emphasis of interaction should lie.

Project management support and expertise

o   Plan personal research development program – guidance

o   Plan research processes – goal setting

o   Support reflection about research experiences – sounding board

o   Review research progress – critical friend

Technical coaching

o   Respond to questions about research activity – knowledge development

o   Offer advice about research actions within their area of expertise - offer knowledge

o   Offer alternative solutions to research issues – options for problem solving

Network expansion

o   Indicate key sources of advice within the research network – expand network

o   Introduce new researcher to cross institutional network colleagues – referral agent

o   Indicate how to access key sources of research knowledge – open doors

o   Offer advice about accessing further research training - suggestions

The following checklist should be used to establish the relationship focus.

What are your priorities for the mentoring relationship?

Rank the following: 1 is Essential   5 is Optional

Name:

Project Management Support and Expertise

☐ Plan research processes – goal setting

☐ Support reflection about research experiences – sounding board

☐ Review research progress – critical friend

☐ Discuss relevant concepts and theories – knowledge development

☐ Planning personal research development program – guidance

Technical Coaching

☐ Respond to questions about research focus and activity – Clarifying direction

☐ Offer advice about research actions within area of expertise - offer knowledge

☐ Offer alternative solutions to research issues – options for problem solving

☐ Offer advice on learning sources for data collection:

   Interviews, Observation, Questionnaires, and Record Scanning protocols

☐ Offer advice on learning sources for statistical analysis and interpretation.

☐ Offer advice on learning sources for qualitative coding, thematic and grounded analysis

☐ Offer advice on learning sources for conceptualising practical and theoretical conclusions

☐ Offer advice on learning sources for structuring text and reviewing

Network Expansion

☐ Indicate key sources of advice within the research network – expand network

☐ Introduce new researcher to cross institutional network colleagues – referral agent

☐ Indicate how to access key sources of research knowledge – open doors

☐ Offer advice about accessing further research training - suggestions