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## Research mentoring on the edge: Early Career Researchers and academic fringe-dwelling

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Discourses of research leadership define not only what quality research leadership can and should be, but also identify those who speak and act with authority. Similarly, these discourses construct particular professional identities and idealised 'ways of being'. They provide possibilities for research leaders as well as those categorised as 'Early Career Researchers' (ECRs) to create alternative identities and representations of themselves. This study reports the views of 32 academics across 16 Australian universities in four States about research mentoring and leadership for ECRs. The primary interest was to explore how research leadership is conceptualised, implemented and negotiated in the disciplinary fields of business, nursing and education. Whilst a number of ECRs viewed formal research mentoring as taking a 'tick the box' approach that they believed of limited value, a number of research leaders had different views. Most senior research leaders viewed the systemic provision of assistance their universities offered in a positive light. The dissonance in views centred on the subject positioning of academics in research. The dissatisfaction expressed by ECRs, a number of whom positioned themselves as fringe-dwellers 'on the edge' of their institutional research culture, raises questions about research sustainability and succession planning in Australian tertiary institutions.

**Keywords:** Early Career Researchers, research leadership, mentoring

### Background

Government initiatives in Australia stress quality research leadership as an essential element of educational outcomes (Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003), and an important dimension of succession planning in an ageing academic workforce (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, 2008). Increasingly, university strategies for improving overall research performance are underpinned by discourses of research leadership that in turn play an important role in shaping organisational cultures and academic subjectivities. These discourses vary between universities but tend to define what 'quality' research leadership can and should be and also

legitimate the authority of those in formal research leadership positions. Similarly, discourses of research leadership construct particular professional identities and idealised ‘ways of being’, providing opportunities for research leaders as well as those academics categorised as ‘Early Career Researchers’ to create alternative identities and ways of representing themselves (Devos, 2007).

Yet, as some researchers have noted, dominant discourses “map out” what can be said and thought about what they define as their various domains’ (Pennycook, 1994, p.128) and they exclude or ‘rule out other ways of thinking, talking or acting’ (MacLure, 2003, p.178, emphasis in the original). Discursive inclusions and exclusions are important when analysing the narrative accounts of research leaders, managers and academic staff. Understanding how research leadership is operationalised, experienced and negotiated within universities requires consideration of formal mentoring programs and mentoring relationships as mechanisms through which relations of power are enacted, maintained and sustained.

We build on prior studies examining the forces that shape notions and practices of leadership (Ribbins and Gunter, 2002) to explore one particular area – research mentoring for Early Career Researchers (ECRs). Prior studies indicate that ‘formal mentoring programs have been shown to improve practice in higher education’ (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008, p.183). A 2010 study of a 10-year mentoring program in Canada concludes that ‘positive research outcomes’ are achieved where a ‘community of practice’ is developed through ‘effective mentoring’ (Hubball, Clarke & Poole, 2010, p.117). Similarly, Diamond (2010) examines mentoring as a learning partnership, describing the positive relationship as one of ‘hermeneutic helpers’ (p.204). However, he also argues ‘the need for a more responsive form of mentoring in higher education ... [is] confirmed by the many “horror” stories of indifference and even abrogation of responsibility that circulate through academe’ (Diamond, 2010, p.204). United Kingdom researchers Alldred and Miller (2007, p.148) note, ‘the way our research performance is measured and judged comes to be productive of our ways of being and our academics selves’. They discuss the repositioning of academics as entities to serve competitive market forces, lamenting that ‘we cannot measure that which we value, and instead we come to value that which can be measured’ (2007, p.163).

In the Australian and New Zealand higher education sectors, mentoring has been widely taken up as a strategy for academic and research leadership development (Devos, 2008) as well as a means to enhance ‘quality of research-led teaching’ (Ewing, Freeman, Barrie, Bell, O’Connor, Waugh and Sykes, 2008, p.294). Formal mentoring programs have been adopted by Australian universities since the 1990s (see AVCC, 2001). Some programs are funded and run within faculties, while others are funded through central university initiatives and are specifically aligned to organisational goals of staff development and performance enhancement. Institutional formal mentoring program initiatives reflect the enterprise university expectations of new work practices. As Devos points out:

They activate the deployment of mechanism of self-regulation as work groups and individuals set about improving themselves in order to improve organisational performance, for example through aggressive grant getting, consultancy and publication behaviours. Managing how workers understand themselves and their work becomes a key priority of the enterprise university, and is supported through the conduct of mentoring programmes. (Devos, 2008, p.199)

We are mindful that not all formal mentoring programs are designed to mould individual academics into organisationally productive knowledge workers. However, many of our participants indicate there is a persistent view that formal mentoring operates to monitor the performance and alter subjective experiences of academic workers.

To explore these ideas, we draw on Foucault's (1988, 2002) theory of governmentality through which the governance of populations is effected by technologies of the self. 'Government', in a Foucauldian sense, refers to the exercise of power over an individual to direct conduct toward a central goal, in this case, that of becoming a 'research active' academic. Nikolas Rose usefully discusses 'governmentality' as encompassing 'all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others...it also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one's own passions, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself' (1999, p.3). Devos' (2008) notion of exploring 'the general politics of truth of mentoring as always good and unproblematic' (p.202), is useful to depict the spaces in between what institutions claim are the desired effects of mentoring and ways in which mentoring is seen to work through the eyes of ECRs. We probe the ways in which idealised academic subjectivities are constructed for and by Early Career Researchers (ECRs) – in their own eyes and those of research leaders. Specifically, we consider the role that mentoring plays in shaping ECRs as 'governable subjects' within the current academic workspace. Although research mentoring may be intended by institutions, managers and research leaders as a means of supporting staff career development and encouraging productivity, for many ECRs the strategies and techniques associated with mentoring are experienced as marginalising and exclusionary.

## **The study**

This paper reports data from a study of 32 academics across 16 Australian universities in four Australian States. The primary aim was to explore how research leadership is conceptualised and practiced within disciplinary fields providing educational and professional preparation for business, education and nursing. This paper draws on one emergent theme from findings of the study – that of research mentoring and leadership for Early Career Researchers (ECRs). Early Career Researcher is defined here as an academic within five years of post-doctoral confirmation (ARC, 2010). The 32 academics interviewed included ECRs as well as senior research leaders (Deans, Associate Deans of Research, Heads of School or Department) and senior management who have responsibility for research leadership. Interviewees included male (n=14) and female (n=18) academic research staff across Victoria (n=10), New South Wales (n=12), Queensland (n=6) and Western Australian (n=4) universities. Universities and participants are located in city, rural and regional settings and interviews occurred in person and by telephone. Interviews were of 30-50 minutes duration, were recorded, transcribed and then coded as themes emerged.

## **Perceptions of formal mentoring in Australian universities**

For most research leaders interviewed in our study, formal mentoring is seen as a series of structured measures to assist ECRs 'learn the ropes' of academia and provide some measurable means of professional development. Some research leaders see formal mentoring direct new or inexperienced academics towards alignment and achievement of university strategic goals. While some discussed misgivings about the emphasis mentoring programs placed on performativity, others viewed this as necessary and desirable. They saw this

emphasis as appropriate for both the institution and the individual ECR, therefore an unproblematic expectation. For example, one university research manager said:

For the very few early career researchers who've not got even a faintest clue about how to apply for a grant, academic mentoring is good because the academic mentors in that sense will provide a sense of the quality of the ideas. (Mark, interview, August, 2010)

Mentoring is seen by Mark as shaping and in some cases rejecting the ideas that ECRs bring to the research table. Other research leaders describe various initiatives designed to fulfil university aspirations and expectations 'to nurture people's leadership' (Hetty, interview, June 2010). According to Hetty:

People can be a little complacent and not everyone is desperately active research-wise, in fact, quite inactive. So beefing up the expectation that everyone will be active, or else they simply don't get study leave or they certainly don't get promotion is one strategy adopted. (Hetty, interview, June 2010)

Hetty believes that making the high expectations of research performativity clear to ECRs and lifting their expectations and performance requirements will develop what Devos (2008) discusses as the blueprint of a 'good researcher'. For these research leaders, providing structured courses, programs, financial incentives and advice to assist ECRs align with university aims, echo Foucault's notion that individuals comply to undertake institutional work through policing or disciplining their own actions. Thus 'seemingly without coercion' the self-discipline exercised by many ECRs produces 'individuals as subjects of their own desire while integrating them into a much broader system of regulation' (Burke 2007, p.43) implemented by tertiary and government institutions. Valerie Hey (2004, p.33) describes this as 'buying into the particular economy of new times performativity'. The assumption that ECRs are aligned to the economically oriented goals of the enterprise university, and that they want to comply in order for the institution to achieve proves problematic for a number of ECRs. As Alldred and Miller (2007) state, 'we may not share these values, but it is the fact that they are *assumed* that is problematic' in discussing their 'disquiet' in the 'conservative or de-politicising effects' of the RAE in the UK (2007, p.163, emphasis in the original).

However, a number of research leaders interviewed also discussed the tensions between the current metrics used to judge research value and forms of collaborative, team-based research necessary to inform professional practice. Crystal, a director of research in nursing, says,

What is measured is the number of grants we get and publications, but clinicians don't always read publications so we know that our research is only useful if it gets used in our field. (Crystal, interview, August, 2010)

She says that her institution supports her efforts to continue to build team-based research and 'having a culture that's really committed to building for the future' (Crystal, interview, August, 2010). Lena, head of a business school, agrees and argues that 'collective mentoring' which is apparent in many professional associations, is needed to achieve 'fundamental cultural change' (interview, August, 2010). She says that multi-disciplinary approaches to research 'fall through the cracks' because the current measures value a 'siloes disciplinary

orientation' which does not promote 'a sort of collegial academic context and the inter-disciplinarity' needed in research (Lena, interview, August, 2010).

Ivan, head of a business school, talks about the 'pull and push sort of dimension to research' that makes managing the 'tension between the messages or the requirements ... from a Vice Chancellor and the track record behaviour of staff' difficult if not impossible (Ivan, interview, July, 2010). He says:

I'm being told by my Vice Chancellor where my staff have to play. Now, I've got staff who don't play in that space, who are doing, in a sense, a different type of work...I've got to as a manager, manage staff into alternative directions. (Ivan, interview, July, 2010)

Ivan sees this as extremely problematic in a context where industry-funded research has been valued by the university in the past, and in which staff were previously rewarded for building commercially funded research relationships with the business community. Now, however, staff are required to refocus their research energies toward applying for nationally competitive grants and top ranked publications. Ivan considers this can lead to 'depression or people being stressed out because they feel they can't get what they're doing recognised' (Ivan, interview, July, 2010). For a number of research leaders the processes of shaping their staff to the corporate university's aims and goals is not achievable or even desirable, particularly where there are professional practice partnerships to be factored into the research equation.

Almost all ECRs interviewed perceive formal mentoring processes as a mechanism of governance 'at the coal face'. ECRs in this study report that the 'pecking orders' and 'gatekeeping' forces identified in the 1990s (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999) are still evident in 2010. For example, one ECR speaks about 'the boys' club' approach to senior research decisions being made, where men appear privileged in terms of time release and access to initial conversations about potential research projects. While women may have been included, or indeed expected, to participate in formal mentoring programs, they are 'not even invited to the table to discuss potential research projects' when it comes to actual research opportunities (Belle, interview, August, 2010). This form of political invisibility is also a strategy used to reshape the research agendas, priorities and teams of ECRs, or encourage them to discipline their actions to fit a corporate ideal of a 'good researcher'. In addition to institutional governance of research subjectivities, concern is expressed that governments change the rules of research constantly, and as universities respond to these changes, there is continual flux in terms of what 'counts' as research and what does not. Erica says:

They create one set of rules, you try and meet those, and then the game shifts, so there's no point in a way, in putting all of your eggs in a basket. (Erica, interview, August, 2010)

Similarly, Derek says:

Every couple of years they get a 'u-beaut' idea and throw everything out, all the balls up into the air again and start from scratch. And that's not really helpful when you have to start from scratch when you're already *at* scratch. (Derek, interview August 2010, emphasis in the original)

Many of the ECRs interviewed use the analogy of ‘stardom’ to describe their various experiences of mentoring in the academy and illustrate the dissonance between their own research goals and the research goals of the corporate university.

### **Rising and falling ‘stars’...mentoring for inequality**

A number of participants identify practices where small numbers of individuals are plucked out of the ECR ‘pool’ and provided with specific and exclusive mentoring to enable their success. Positioned as ‘rising stars’ with outstanding research potential, these few are held up as shining examples of performative success, to which all ECRs are expected to aspire. In a 2008 study on mentoring women in Australian universities, Devos argues, ‘Mentoring then, is both concerned with *improving* performance, and implicated in the task of *governing* performance in accordance with institutional norms’ (2008, p.202, italics in the original). Both male and female ECRs in this study support Devos’ (2008) claim. They state that their experiences of formal mentoring programs are ones in which a corporate, competitive view of a ‘successful’ researcher is promoted. Those individual researchers lauded as ‘stars’ with high ‘outputs’ receive tangible rewards that rapidly translate to career advancement, whilst others are left to navigate performativity demands without the same encouragement or benefits. One ECR says:

Certain people will be imagined to be typically a star...and they are very clearly positioned as somebody who has the potential to be an important researcher and they’re very clearly positioned in public discourse in how they’re looked after, how they’re kind of protected from certain kinds of work... And then there’s often the informal processes, informal kind of legacy giving, so who is seen worthy of being handed over a legacy of kind of protection and nurturing, and being given opportunities. And then, there are other people who are just kind of excluded from that...those informal networks, they’re very closed, they’re highly ‘agenda’d’ they’re done behind closed doors, and they are also self-perpetuating, ie. if you don’t get in, you don’t get in. (Erica, interview, August 2010)

Similarly, Sam says:

Rising stars in research had been nominated by the university and so their workload is going to be reduced, so they can focus on research. These are people who are to be ‘stars’ and so they become the ‘stars’, because if you’ve given time, space and money to do research, well of course you will be able to get the track record. (Sam, interview, August 2010, emphasis in the original)

Sam is quick to point out that his view is not sparked by jealousy. He adds, ‘Not that I’m saying that these people who get nominated aren’t worthy, they *are* worthy, but there are *many* worthy people who get overlooked’ (Sam, interview, August 2010, emphasis in the original). For Sam, it is directing limited financial and workload resources to reward a few ‘stellar’ ECRs that is experienced as demoralising and seen as inequitable by many other ECRs. The analogy of stardom is also used by one research leader, Mark, who alludes to ‘the odd superstar who just goes “nova” immediately’ in the context of a young ECR winning an ARC grant soon after doctoral confirmation (Mark, interview, August 2010). Clearly institutional performativity cultures that promote certain individuals as ‘stars’, assuming that these ‘stars’ will inspire and provide leadership as research role models is not necessarily

perceived in this way by their fellow ECRs. Rather than seeing such practices as inspirational, they are seen by many as inequitable and demoralising.

### **Issues of Life/work balance: the 24/7 academic**

Balancing life with work demands is undoubtedly one of the most contentious issues facing employees in the enterprise university era. Debowksi's (2010) study identifies life/work balance as a constant tension for research leaders who often have significant personal workloads to maintain high level staff outcomes. Similarly, a 2010 UK study in the area of teacher education mentoring found 'unanimously the main barrier to research cited by both teacher educators and research mentors was time, or rather lack of time: "a massive issue", as one teacher educator put it' (Griffiths, Thompson & Hryniewicz, 2010, p.253). Although the issue of time poverty has been raised in almost all prior studies, it continues to be a major factor in the discourses of both ECRs and research leaders in this study. This suggests that very little has occurred to redress the issue in meaningful and tangible ways across the sector.

Research leaders argue time poverty results in research activity being pushed to one side to meet imperatives of teaching, marking and administrative work. One research leader in education emphasised that 'fitting in' research is 'very, very hard going' (Amy, interview, August 2010). Amy notes that research 'substantially happens beyond our day job' and outlines the very real dilemmas of meeting teaching demands for professional excellence that do not permit 'taking short cuts'. She adds, 'you've almost got to approach research as if it's your hobby because it will inevitably impinge on life beyond the university campus' (Amy, interview, August 2010). These comments illustrate ways in which an institution can seek to govern the subjectivities of ECRs as positioning the choice between work and life/work balance as 'inevitable'. Indeed, there is a clear mandate that there is institutional expectation that research work is expected to 'impinge on life beyond the university campus' as normalised behaviour marking research success. For Amy, there are dilemmas in advising and mentoring ECRs in their academic careers because 'the costs and consequences' of meeting professional teaching demands means that 'research becomes the poor relation'. The result is that ECRs who may be excellent teachers, but not considered sufficiently research active, are often not easily promoted. She says that some ECRs consider 'the cost of working 24/7 too high'.

Many ECRs consider the research workloads they see subsumed year after year are unrealistic for life/work balance. They cannot envisage how to juggle high teaching, marking and student welfare loads with increasing research demands advocated in both formal and informal mentoring. A number of ECRs say that they have tried to maintain what one describes as a 'workaholic kind of mentality' following doctoral completion, but have found it impossible. Derek says:

There are very real concerns about the un-sustainability of that...I'm thinking of the very young ECRs who come straight out with a newly minted PhD at the age of about 27 or 30 who are looking at the model and just saying 'that's not for me'. (Derek, interview, August 2010)

A young researcher with small children, Gary agrees. He says 'putting the academy first' is untenable. He states:

Being an academic is part of my identity. It isn't my total identity. And yet when I see a lot of people who have *made it*, who are supposed to be the ones who

could mentor me, they're a 24/7 academic – and it's as if that academic identity has taken over. And as an early career researcher, I'm trying to work out is that what *I* want for the future of, not just me, but my family and my children? (Gary, interview, August 2010, emphasis in original)

Moreover, Gary questions whether mentoring simply serves to convince him to adopt a 24/7 academic identity. He notes the 'tacit understanding' that to succeed in academia, ECRs need to 'sell your work/life balance' ideals. He states:

*We get the mentoring but it's basically just a knowledge based mentoring. It's not where we sit down and talk about identity constructions and what it is and the tensions that go with that kind of stuff. Particularly if you're trying to have a work/life balance...am I just being mentored into not having a work/life balance as an academic? Is that what it ultimately is all about?* (Gary, interview, August 2010, emphasis in the original)

The stresses and difficulties in making these decisions are evident for these ECRs. Conversely, in making such choices, ECRs are described by some research leaders as 'single combat warriors' and seen as unable to 'get with the program' or willing to make the transition to the new competitive framework.

Some ECRs use terms such as 'marginalised' and 'resistant' to describe their subject positions in relation to the current corporate mentoring climate. They insist that they are not acting from motives of anti-authoritarianism, nor are they striving to be difficult or non-co-operative. Indeed, these ECRs are keenly aware their stances result in considerable career cost. However, they point to institutional policies advocating work/life balance agendas and discuss their perplexity at the dissonance between the rhetoric of care for academic employees and their own lived realities. One female ECR claims she needs to 'survive' and she does not want to 'self sabotage', so her 'tactical thing' is to produce sufficient corporate product in order to retain her position (Erica, interview August 2010). Such concerns mirror earlier research findings reporting 'levels of stress increasing amongst academic staff within UK Higher Education institutions' (Fowler, 2005, p.183) with the resultant effect that academia in the UK is now seen as 'a poor career' choice (Fowler, 2005, p.195). This is a salient warning for Australian institutions about the sustainability of current approaches to research mentoring and career aspirations for future intellectual workers.

## Conclusion

There are a number of fundamental challenges facing research mentoring in Australian universities. Primarily, the disjuncture is between perceptions of research leaders that mentoring programs and structures are benign and helpful, and ECRs' perceptions that research mentoring is a calculated strategy for harnessing intellectual workers to meet the instrumentalist agendas of government funding metrics. The ECRs interviewed consider universities are trying to reshape them as governable subjects by implementing work practices based primarily on performativity models. Participants were particularly resistant to practices such as the heralding of research 'stars' as inspirational mentors. Similarly, there was widespread objection amongst participants to normative understandings of research as a 24/7 job and to what they saw as a veritable assembly line of research production. This study reiterates, despite decades of research highlighting the issue of time poverty, the concerns expressed by both ECRs, managers and research leaders that time poverty is a major factor in

lack of quality research quantum. In our view, little appears to have been achieved across the sector to rectify the imbalance. Finally, the study raises issues of Australia's succession planning for research leadership. Current research leadership models are flawed in terms of supporting sustainable life/work balance for many ECRs. A fundamental question Australian universities face in terms of research sustainability is how many ECR 'academic fringe-dwellers' will choose to remain either marginalised by current research accountability frames or leave the academy. Loss of a critical mass of ECRs from universities to other sectors of employment is an issue that must be addressed.

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