

Experiences of mentorship with academic staff doctoral candidates at a South African university

Anna Strebel and Tamara Shefer

Abstract

Given the growing emphasis on academic research output and the challenges encountered in expediting completion of doctoral studies especially, mentorship is increasingly being utilised as a capacity development strategy for supporting scholars to complete post-graduate studies. This article reports on a mentorship project aimed at academic staff enrolled for doctoral studies in a health sciences faculty at a South African university, based on reflections drawn from annual feedback from the mentees and the annual report of the mentor, as well as a focus group conducted with mentees by an independent researcher. Participants found the mentorship, with its combination of individual and group meetings, as well as regular residential writing retreats, to be extremely helpful. A number of key features that enable the mentorship process emerged, and issues relating to supervision and mentorship were highlighted, especially regarding power dynamics.

Background

There has been a growing acknowledgement globally and locally of the critical value of knowledge production for development. Within the South African context specifically, the understanding of higher education as a key driver for meeting the broader goals of socio-economic redress and transformation has been widely acknowledged (CHE/CREST 2009; Cloete and Bunting 2013; Pillay 2010). Moreover, the challenges of increasing specialised postgraduate output, especially at PhD and postdoctoral level, have also been foregrounded, given historical practices of exclusion and inadequate educational systems (Badat 2007; Mouton 2011).

South Africa continues to compare unfavourably to other countries with respect to doctoral output, producing a very small number of doctorates per million of the total population, together with lengthy time frames for graduation and high drop-out rates. In addition, doctoral graduates still reflect gender and race disparities, failing to represent adequately national demographics (ASSAf 2010; CHE/CREST 2009). Higher education institutions are in this context tasked with increasing postgraduate and scientific research output, with pressure to graduate more students across diverse areas (Badat 2007; Bitzer and Albertyn 2011; CHE/CREST 2009). This in turn highlights the requirement for academic staff to be effective supervisors within the context of these multiple pressures.

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