

Specific examples – An issue involving a gay researcher and confidence

A female gay researcher in theology found herself facing a number of challenges, in particular, dealing with people's perception of both her work and her sexuality. For the person concerned it was therefore important to build up her confidence to feel able to conduct research in what might be perceived to be a controversial area. One of the things that she had to consider was that her research area and research development could be limited by the perceptions around her. This is where an exceptional mentor really helped. The role of the mentor in this case was to help and support their mentee to help her to present her work, and to think about and decide when and how and if to declare their sexual orientation. By disclosing her sexuality to her mentor he was able to help her to present herself in the academic world and negotiate herself into the environment.

As an experienced academic he outlined the reactions she may expect to encounter and gave her the tools to help. These included taking her along to meetings, and getting her involved in projects to expose her to the university in ways in which she might not ordinarily have been exposed to, and at all times explaining how he would deal with specific circumstances. This helped to build both her confidence and her institutional knowledge.

Learning points/evaluation

- Setting up mentoring relationships can demonstrate how the university is able to support early career researchers in relation to their subject area, particularly if this falls into a diversity area and where their personal circumstances may pose concerns for them.
- In setting up a mentoring relationship, identify staff as mentors and people who might need a mentor and match the two together so, for example, a LGBT professor might be a perfect mentor for an early career researcher by showing how they have progressed in their careers and helping them to consider and deal with any obstacles they might have to overcome. Identify subject and area-specific people, ideally senior staff who can support them through what they themselves may have been through. It is then an ongoing relationship where the mentee can request a mentee/mentor discussion which is entirely separate to a discussion with a line manager. The mentoring relationship is a different relationship which allows the mentee to be vulnerable and get help confidently without it having an adverse affect on their work.
- The most useful thing in the mentor relationship is in having someone as a mentor who is insightful and self reflective and who takes their commitments seriously.
- A mentor should be someone who the mentee can 'sense check' things with, which is particularly useful in equality and diversity sensitive issues.