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Three Key Ways That Mentorship Can Support Early Career Scholars

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Abstract

Navigating the intrinsic landscape of academia can often feel like attempting to manoeuvre through a maze, especially for individuals at the dawn of their scholarly journey. Drawing on my previous experience as an early career scholar, my current role as a global mentor to emerging scholars, and my decade of research on sustainable careers, I shed light on the profound impact of mentorship for early career scholars. This article uncovers three compelling facets illuminating how mentorship can offer robust scaffolding for these intellectuals. Firstly, we unravel the secret to deciphering the unspoken codes of the academic world, ensuring you are not just a player but a master of the game. Secondly, we explore how taking the reins of your academic destiny can be made more attainable with a mentor's steady support and wisdom. Lastly, we delve into the often overlooked link between mentorship and holistic well-being, emphasising the vital role in nurturing careers and personal fulfilment. Through these insights, we see how mentorship catalyses early career scholars towards heightened productivity, career satisfaction, and an increased likelihood of success in their scholarly pursuits.

Keywords: early career, health, mentoring, scholars, sustainable careers, well-being.

1. Setting the Scene

Are you contemplating a career in academia or actively pursuing a PhD?

Are you a Post-Doc or an Assistant Professor?

Are you currently involved with or interested in mentoring early career scholars?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, this article is tailored to your needs.

While the definition of an early career scholar can vary based on institutional or regional standards, it generally pertains to a maximum of four years in academia following the completion of a PhD (Elsevier, 2023). To illustrate, I obtained my PhD in 2017 (Donald, 2017), which classified me as an early career scholar from 2017 to 2021. Subsequently, I was promoted to Associate Professor of Sustainable Careers and Human Resource Management in 2022.

Therefore, the insights shared in this article are rooted in my prior experience as an early career scholar, my ongoing role as a mentor to scholars worldwide, and my research on sustainable careers.

2. Mentorship for Early Career Scholars

Now, let us delve into three key ways mentorship can be a valuable support system for early career scholars to leverage their mentor's experience as personal learning opportunities.

2.1. Understanding the rules of the game

What do we mean by 'the rules of the game'? Academia can often be a challenging environment to navigate, especially for individuals like me who were the first in their immediate families to attend university. Various institutions, faculties, departments, and academic roles may have differing expectations and criteria for defining career success. Engaging in conversations with your supervisor is advisable to clarify the expectations for career advancement. Once you have a foundational understanding of these expectations, having a mentor becomes especially valuable. This reflects how seeking career advice can enhance career sustainability (Donald & Mouratidou, 2022).

For instance, consider a scenario where success in your academic role hinges primarily on your teaching abilities. In this case, you may need to create and deliver various modules and teaching materials. A mentor can supply insights into best practices and highlight common pitfalls to avoid. Additionally, they can help you to manage and support students effectively.

Conversely, if your career advancement is contingent upon a specific number of research outputs published in highly-ranked journals, a mentor can be instrumental in your journey. They can aid you in identifying suitable journals for publication, navigating the submission systems, crafting compelling cover letters, and formulating responses to peer review reports. Moreover, mentors can help manage your expectations. For instance, it is often a significant shock to early career scholars when they submit their first manuscript and discover that the average time for a first decision can span several months to a year or more, with significant variations based on one's research area and choice of journal to submit to (Huisman & Smits, 2017).

2.2. Taking ownership of one's career

Once you understand the rules of the game, the next crucial step is to take ownership of your career (Arthur et al., 2016; Donald et al., 2019; 2023). In the short-to-medium term, the benchmarks for career progression can serve as your guiding goals. Your mentor can provide strategic insights on pursuing your goals and managing your time effectively. They can also play a pivotal role in helping you periodically review and assess your progress.

In the medium-to-long term, building a sustainable academic career often involves expanding your network and gaining international recognition. For early career scholars, networking can be particularly challenging due to hierarchical power dynamics and limited time to develop relationships, risking academic isolation (Belkhir et al., 2019). However, your mentor likely has an extensive network of contacts worldwide and may be willing to facilitate introductions on your behalf. This can also be an invaluable way to gain insights into the inner workings of different institutions, which can be highly beneficial if you are considering a career move.

2.3. Promoting health and well-being

Building a sustainable career involves adapting to different contexts over time (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), with key sustainability indicators being health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005). While understanding the rules of the game and taking ownership of your career provides a solid foundation for success, prioritising health and well-being is equally essential.

Academics often contend with demanding workloads, elevated levels of stress, and constant rejection decisions from job applications, grant applications, or manuscript submissions. These factors can collectively affect one's mental health and well-being and may lead to imposter syndrome, where an individual feels underserving of their current position (Abdelaal, 2020). In such situations, a mentor can be incredibly valuable in helping you shift your perspective. For instance, given that rejection is a recurring aspect of an academic career, a mentor can normalise these experiences and encourage you to see them as opportunities for personal growth and development by embracing a holistic, lifewide and lifelong approach to learning (Cole & Donald, 2022).

Moreover, if, like me, you tend to struggle with turning down new projects or opportunities, there is a high risk of burnout. A mentor can aid you in crafting a set of questions to consider before taking on any new commitment. Additionally, a mentor can be crucial in recognising signs of strain on your mental and physical well-being. They can guide you toward specific support services that offer specialised aid, ensuring that you receive the necessary help to maintain your health and well-being as you progress in your academic career.

3. Conclusion

In summary, a mentor can benefit early career scholars, helping them understand the intricacies of academia, assume co-responsibility for their career trajectory, and nurture their mental health and well-being. Consequently, mentorship can enhance productivity, career satisfaction, and success in research endeavours (Diggs-Andrews et al., 2021).

If you are searching for a mentor, consider exploring early career mentorship programs or directly reaching out to individuals whose backgrounds and academic experiences align with your needs and aspirations. I wish you all the best in your academic career.

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