

# The Precision Mentorship Programme for Inclusive Researcher Development: A critical reflection

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## Abstract

*Effective mentorship is widely acknowledged as essential for fostering professional growth and enhancing research capabilities in UK higher education (HE). However, the process of finding a mentor often remains informal, relying heavily on personal connections, characteristics and pre-existing relationships. This critical review examines the Precision Mentorship Programme (PMP) a novel initiative developed and piloted at Kingston University with researchers in the arts and humanities. Designed to build confidence, enhance research skills, and support the creation of robust research plans and funding proposals, the PMP combined four one-hour personalised mentorship sessions with wrap-around support and resources, to guide 12 participants through the complexities of academic research and funding acquisition. In this article we describe the PMP's design, delivery and evaluation. We draw on our experiences of developing and implementing the PMP to reflect on its successes, limitations, and broader implications for inclusive researcher development in UK HE. While the PMP successfully achieved several of its objectives, it also encountered challenges in fully addressing the diverse needs of its participants and overcoming systemic barriers to inclusive professional development and career progression. The broader implications for UK HE professional development include 1) Equipping experienced researchers with precision mentorship skills, resources and incentives to mentor, 2) Developing and testing PMP models within research groups, projects and programmes, 3) Recognising mentor's contributions in institutional and sector quality performance frameworks. In conclusion, the PMP is a useful approach for inclusive researcher development, however for its full potential and benefits to be sustained mentors need to be recognised and rewarded by institutions and research quality assessment frameworks.*

**Keywords:** precision mentorship; researcher development; coaching; inclusive research culture

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## Introduction

In the United Kingdom and internationally, effective mentorship is widely acknowledged as essential for fostering professional growth and career progression of academics and researchers at all levels, from early career researchers (ECRs) to professors. According to the literature mentorship should ideally serve multiple functions, including career development, psychosocial support, and role modelling (**Ragins & Kram, 2007**). Mentorship provides not only guidance and encouragement, but also facilitates the development of professional networks, which are essential for career advancement (**Allen & Eby, 2007**).

Fostering a supportive and inclusive research culture is central to the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers* (**Vitae, 2019**). It will be increasingly important for research institutions to demonstrate inclusion under the People, Culture and Environment in the 2029 Research Excellence Framework (REF). However, at present opportunities for researchers in the UK are often not inclusive, with significant barriers persisting, limiting diversity and stifling innovation within research communities (**Ross, 2024**).

In UK academic contexts, the process of finding a mentor remains informal and unstructured, favouring those with established networks and those with similar characteristics or backgrounds to their mentors, or previous supervisory relationships. This reliance on informal, connection-based mentorship exacerbates systemic inequities, excluding many talented individuals. Underrepresented groups frequently face barriers to accessing high-quality mentorship and opportunities; and often share characteristics protected under the UK Equality Act (such as disability, gender, sexual orientation, and race), have caring responsibilities, or are on part-time or temporary contracts (**Griffin, 2019: 93-110**).

Precision mentorship has emerged to address the limitations of traditional mentorship models like GROW (**Whitmore, 2010: 83-84**) and OSCAR (**Gilbert & Whittleworth, 2009**). While effective for many, these models often fail to meet the nuanced needs of underrepresented mentees in specialised areas of work. Drawing on inclusive leadership principles, intersectionality theory, and tailored coaching practices, precision mentorship recognises and tackles systemic and individual barriers. It is especially relevant in disciplines requiring specialised skills or affected by systemic inequities, such as academic medicine (**Cohen, 2024; Ransdell et al., 2021**) and the creative industries (**Cateridge et al., 2024: 174-193**). By

prioritising context-specific strategies and skills development, precision mentorship bridges the gap between general frameworks and the tangible, real-world support mentees need to thrive.

In this critical reflection we explain the Precision Mentorship Programme (PMP) a novel initiative developed and piloted at Kingston University with researchers in the arts and humanities. The context for the work was institutional change to develop a Design, Arts and Creative Practice Knowledge Exchange and Research Institute (DACP KERI). Here we draw on our experiences of developing and implementing the PMP to reflect on the challenges, achievements, and broader implications for inclusive researcher development in UK HE.

## **The Precision Mentorship Programme**

**Table 1** illustrates the key phases of this pilot programme from design to conclusion and reporting, described below.

### *Phase 1: Design*

The PMP was conceived as a supportive intervention aimed at empowering individuals at various stages of their research careers; from those just starting out to ECRs and mid-career researchers, as well as highly experienced professors and academics. To design the PMP we drew on mentorship principles, which emphasise creating an environment where mentees can explore their research ideas, receive constructive feedback, and build confidence in their abilities (**Ragins & Kram, 2007**).

Our aim was to offer tailored mentorship experiences that reflect the unique needs and aspirations of each participant (**Allen & Eby, 2007**). We were influenced by fields such as personalised education (which adapts strategies to individual circumstances) and organisational psychology (which focuses on contextual growth). Thus, the PMP was designed to be flexible, inclusive, and aligned with the mentee's unique context.

Alongside this design work, Jensen undertook the administrative process of attaining a budget, tendering, sub-contracting, and agreeing a schedule of services with Morrow.

### *Phase 2: Recruitment*

The recruitment process involved a targeted faculty-wide campaign, led by Jensen, to attract participants, utilising email announcements, departmental meetings, and follow-up conversations. Clear information was provided to outline the application process, ensuring potential participants understood the PMP's objectives and potential benefits.

The 3-week application period allowed interested individuals to express their interest, after which a selection of a cohort of 12 was made based on predefined criteria to ensure a diverse and committed cohort. The key criteria were a) willingness to engage in the programme b) having a research idea, plan or proposal to work on, and c) inclusion of researchers from across design, arts and humanities.

*Jensen reflects:* The PMP was established with a clear focus on supporting and empowering researchers in their development, rather than serving as a monitoring tool. It aimed to meet participants at their current stage and assist them in progressing from that point, regardless of their starting position. Ensuring confidentiality and the inclusion of an independent mentor were critical elements to prevent any perception of performance management. Recruitment materials for the PMP emphasised that the mentorship was designed to provide expert guidance, helping participants reflect on research planning and long-term career goals.

*Table 1. Key Phases of the Precision Mentorship Programme*

<b>Phase 1: Design (Months 1-2)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial planning meetings to define objectives and goals. Agree numbers of participants and number of sessions/activities to be delivered.</li> <li>• Develop a flexible programme structure, including online sessions and wrap around support.</li> <li>• Create supporting materials, such as self-assessment questionnaires and resource documents.</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 2: Recruitment (Month 3)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop recruitment materials and selection criteria.</li> <li>• Launch recruitment campaign via email and departmental announcements. Promote the programme at departmental research meetings.</li> <li>• Open application 3-week period for interested participants.</li> <li>• Select participants based on criteria and objectives.</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 3: Delivery (Months 4-10)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial meeting and orientation session to introduce the programme and understand expectations of each mentee.</li> <li>• Conduct one-to-one mentorship sessions, focusing on individual research goals. Four sessions were available to each mentee over 6 months.</li> <li>• Provide wrap-around support and additional resources and support as needed outside of sessions e.g., comments on research proposals or papers.</li> </ul>

<b>Phase 4: Evaluation (Month 11)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Close the programme and thank mentees for their engagement.</li><li>• Send personalised certificates of attendance and individualised summary feedback to participants.</li><li>• Distribute Participant Evaluation Forms for feedback.</li><li>• Analyse participant engagement and feedback to assess programme effectiveness.</li></ul>
<b>Phase 5: Conclusion and Reporting (Month 11)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Compile a report summarising outcomes and recommendations.</li><li>• Present findings to institutional stakeholders and wider audiences highlighting challenges and achievements.</li><li>• Plan for future mentorship programmes and models based on the pilot's results.</li></ul>

### *Phase 3: Delivery*

Programme delivery centred on one-to-one expert advice sessions led by Morrow, an independent research consultant with over 25 years' experience in academic research. Conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams, the sessions offered flexible scheduling to suit participants' varied needs.

Confidentiality and supportive engagement were essential for creating a safe, empowering environment for exploring research ambitions. Each mentee was asked to complete an 'About you, research strengths and needs' form to discuss at the first meeting. This information gave Morrow a basic understanding of the participant's level of experience, areas of strength and needs, and their goals for the programme.

Each hour-long session began with welcoming and introductions, encouraging open dialogue, enabling participants to discuss their research proposals' topics, challenges, and ideas. This personalised approach provided constructive feedback, promoted self-reflection on strengths and needs, and guided participants in identifying key areas for research development.

*Morrow reflects:* The mentorship programme recognised that a one-size-fits-all approach would not suffice, necessitating a flexible and individualised framework to support participants effectively. To address this, an email list outlining various types of available assistance—such as support with research profiles or written feedback on materials—was provided, enabling participants to select options that aligned with their specific needs.

The PMP also emphasised creating a safe space for participants to share openly about their challenges, including feelings of isolation, rejection, or inequities within the research system. Listening attentively and offering encouragement were central to supporting participants, even in instances

where they felt they had made little progress or faced significant obstacles in their research journeys. The mentorship aimed to provide not only practical guidance but also emotional support, affirming participants' aspirations while addressing their concerns.

During the early stages of the PMP, it became evident that several participants felt isolated and disconnected from both their colleagues' research activities and the university's strategic transition to an institute model. The one-to-one mentorship sessions played a crucial role in fostering connections and collegiality, encouraging participants to engage with colleagues beyond their immediate departments or schools, facilitating a deeper sense of belonging and connection.

#### *Phase 4: Evaluation*

We captured feedback from participants at the end of the PMP using a bespoke questionnaire administered via email. Nine of the 12 mentees responded. Their feedback indicated that the mentorship was instrumental in clarifying mentee's research objectives and enhancing their confidence in applying for funding. Many expressed gratitude for the constructive feedback they received, which they said had helped them to refine their proposals and articulate their research narratives more effectively.

Participant's review of their self-assessed strengths and needs at completion of the PMP revealed that on average the greatest areas of improvement were: 'Feel you have good opportunities to work on research' (average 2.1 point increase on a scale of 1-10), 'Feel confident to prepare funding proposals for research' (increase of 2.03 points), 'Have role models in the organisation' (increase of 2 points). There is no space here to go into the full range of improvements and benefits that were reported.

One of the PMP's most significant achievements was the creation of a nurturing environment where participants felt safe to discuss their research ideas and challenges openly. As one Senior Lecturer noted:

*Elizabeth has been one of the best mentors I have ever had. Her approach to listening, to helping where she could, offering honest and well-informed opinions made it really useful. (Senior Lecturer feedback)*

A benefit of the PMP was that it developed and provided practical resources, including guides and templates that served as valuable tools for participants navigating the often-daunting research landscape. Some of these resources are tailored to signposting support and information in the

university context, whilst others provide the structure for self-reflection, goal setting and monitoring progress. As one participant explained:

*I came away inspired and with a better understanding of how to strengthen my application. Elizabeth also sent me a copy of a colleague's application [with permission] to understand the application requirements better and use as a model.*  
**(Participant feedback)**

The motivational aspects of the PMP were crucial for early-career researchers, as one participant said:

*The mentorship has made me excited and motivated about undertaking more research.* **(Participant feedback)**

Additionally, a Senior Lecturer remarked:

*I think it would have been several years before I had made the progress that I have with writing up my work and developing my research profile.* **(Senior Lecturer feedback)**

The above testimonials highlight the profound impact of the mentorship programme on some of the 12 participants' professional development and research endeavours. However, while the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, it is important to acknowledge that the PMP might not have worked for everyone, and we consider why below.

#### *Phase 5: Conclusion and reporting*

The PMP's conclusion in July 2024 evoked mixed emotions. In their feedback four participants said they were 'sad' the programme had come to an end and six said they would 'definitely' take up an opportunity like this in the future. While many participants expressed gratitude for the support, two mentees, who had engaged less than anticipated, conveyed their thanks with some regret and disappointment via email comments. This stemmed from competing priorities or a feeling that they ought to focus on conducting their research directly.

*Morrow reflects:* Mentorship is an intensive and often invisible process that relies on empathy, authentic enthusiasm, and a personal approach to ensure individuals feel genuinely understood. However, the dynamic is unique, as mentees are neither colleagues, clients, friends, nor confidants. As the programme concluded, a sense of disconnection emerged, marking the end of the formal relationship. While some connections continue through social media, the mentorship contract formally concluded the interaction with the 12 participants, whose journeys had become familiar over time. The relational effort and mutual exchange involved in the



process made the closure feel akin to a loss, underscoring the depth of engagement inherent in effective mentorship.

We produced a report for internal institutional learning that included information about the time investment (**Table 2**) and anonymised feedback from participants. We concluded that flexibility and the online format were key strengths, accommodating participants with diverse responsibilities, such as teaching and administrative duties as well as caring responsibilities and lives outside of work. This adaptability allowed individuals to engage in ways that aligned with their unique circumstances, enhancing accessibility and inclusion.

*Table 2. Delivery Time and Take-up by Participants*

Type of Mentorship Delivered (P=Participant)	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	total
One-to-one online discussion sessions	2	5	2	2	4	4	3	2	4	1	2	4	35
Written comments on a new proposal in development	1	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	10
Written comments on a personal research profile or career development application	-	-	-	2	1	-	2	-	4	-	-	-	9
Written comments on a revised proposal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	2	-	-	-	6
Support with literature searching or planning a literature review	2	1	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Written comments on an academic paper in development	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
<i>Hours of direct individual support</i>	5	11	2	4	11	4	5	6	10	1	2	8	<b>69</b>
<i>Programme administration time (e.g., setting up sessions, recording sessions) 2.5 hrs per week/28 weeks</i>													70
<i>Hours spent developing mentorship resources</i>													16
<i>Programme reporting, review and analysis</i>													15
<i>Total Programme Delivery Time (Hours)</i>													170

## Challenges and Achievements

### *Responding to researchers' diverse needs*

In delivering the programme we found that one of the most challenging issues was the difficulty in assessing and addressing the diverse needs of individual participants effectively, particularly if they didn't know themselves what might help them. While many benefited from the tailored support, some individuals may have felt that their specific needs were not fully met. This disparity highlighted the inherent challenge of providing mentorship experiences that are responsive to the varied expectations and development needs of a diverse cohort.



*Morrow reflects:* As the designer and mentor of the PMP, there was a strong sense of responsibility to support participants and cultivate meaningful mentor-mentee relationships. However, when two participants began to disengage from the online sessions, it prompted feelings of inadequacy, highlighting challenges in connecting with them in ways that might have been more beneficial. This experience underscored the importance of not internalising such challenges and recognising that each participant has unique needs, responsibilities, and obligations that extend beyond their research. The reflection emphasised the necessity of maintaining flexibility and understanding within mentorship practices.

#### *Programme format and schedule*

Although we invited feedback from all 12 participants, 9 replied and it was not possible to know what non-responding participants felt about the programme or their level of engagement. These experiences highlight the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of mentorship responses to cater to a broader range of changing levels and types of need. For example, during the programme it emerged that some participants preferred shorter 30-minute sessions rather than an hour and this additional flexibility could be promoted in future. In the feedback, one person said they would have preferred to meet in person, another person said they would have preferred to have more sessions over a year instead of 6 months. Some participants felt that the structure and time constraints of the programme could hinder deeper engagement, particularly for grant writing support, with one mentee stating,

*I thought that it was very inclusive and suited my needs well.  
[...] The approach worked well but I found it hard to manage  
time. I needed to start writing the outline earlier in the  
process to get feedback. (Senior Lecturer feedback)*

#### *Systemic barriers to researcher development*

A significant challenge that emerged from the programme was the issue of time constraints and the time involved in working on research grants. Many participants struggled to balance their desire to develop research ideas and proposals alongside other work commitments, as well as the demands of engaging with the programme. Additional barriers, such as part-time work and heavy teaching loads, further impeded participants' ability to focus on developing and writing research proposals. Many expressed disillusionment with the competitive funding landscape, the pressure to 'win' grants, and the insider knowledge needed to 'play the game.'

We learnt that while the offer of support is invaluable, it must be accompanied by clear communication about the expectations and realities of the research landscape and who is eligible to apply for grant funding with input from the faculty's Research Development Manager. To support participants, we encouraged collaboration, urging them to connect with peers working on similar themes and to engage with interdisciplinary bidding groups or research incubators going on in the university. These insights into the realities of gaining funding underscore the need for continuous, team-based guidance during grant writing and fostering realistic expectations about the challenges of securing academic funding.

An unexpected benefit was that the reflection and communication between us about general issues arising from the programme offered a conduit for organisational learning. The process of upwards feedback about key issues for researchers helped to foster continuous improvement and knowledge sharing to inform the developing institute.

### **Implications for Professional Development**

The broader implications for professional development within UK HE research include several key components.

- *Mentorship Skills and Capacity:* Equipping more experienced researchers with PMP knowledge and skills, resources and incentives (such as secondments, pay and promotion criteria), is essential for increasing capacity for precision mentorship in different disciplines and contexts of research. Providing prospective mentors with guidelines on inclusive programme design, recruitment, delivery, and evaluation could support equity for underrepresented groups.
- *Models of Mentorship:* Developing the PMP approach into different models within research groups, communities of practice, networks and programmes could extend the benefit of inclusive mentorship in real-world settings. This ensures that mentorship strategies are adaptable to different researchers, disciplines, and contexts, fostering more sustainable scalable models of mentorship.
- *Recognition and Reward:* Acknowledging mentors' contributions within institutional and sector quality frameworks is essential. Valuing mentorship as part of research success, alongside research outputs, motivates experienced researchers to mentor and promotes a culture of inclusion. PMPs should be included in REF 2029 as evidence of investment in People Culture and Environment.

## **Conclusions**

The PMP contributes significantly to enhancing the research environment of DACP KERI, and equity in researcher development. Sustainability of programmes like this depends on balancing innovation with realistic resource allocation and ensuring they are part of a broader ecosystem of support. Success requires collaboration, adaptability, and a commitment to organisational learning from both the challenges and achievements in the process. Precision mentorship should be utilised by research institutions and be included in quality assessment frameworks. While the PMP proved successful at Kingston University, its implementation may pose challenges for smaller specialist higher education institutions with a teaching focus, as they may lack the necessary resources to sustain it. To address this, the proposal to include precision mentorship as evidence for REF 2029's People, Culture and Environment element could be expanded to consider additional strategies that may incentivise buy-in from senior management at non-research-intensive institutions.

## **Key Insights:**

- The PMP created an inclusive mentorship experience and supportive environment where all researchers, regardless of their background, discipline or level of experience, felt valued and had equal opportunities to succeed.
- The PMP helps mentees build confidence in their abilities and develop a collaborative outlook, which are crucial for navigating complex research processes, accessing funding opportunities, and identifying useful networks and resources.
- Research institutions can utilise the learning from designing and delivering the PMP to identify and address barriers, implement effective practices, and develop support structures that meet researchers' diverse needs.

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## List of Tables

Table 1. Key Phases of the Precision Mentorship Programme

Table 2. Delivery Time and Take-up by Participants

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Dr Meg Jensen is Professor of English Literature and Creative Writing at Kingston University in London. She publishes widely on trauma, literature, the autobiographical and relational ethics, including *The Art and Science of Trauma* and the *Autobiographical: Negotiated Truths* (Palgrave 2019) and *Expressive Writing and Telling and Participatory Action Research: Developing a Relational Ethics of Practice for Story-based Interventions in Crisis Settings* (2024). Her key interest is in identifying and testing innovative approaches community development to promote collaborative and transformative social change and she has overseen multiple international funded research projects with crisis and conflict affected communities.



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