Brief Report of the NIHR Southampton BRC Reverse Mentoring Scheme 2024

Acknowledgements

We thank the following people for their contributions to the Reverse Mentoring Scheme:

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Introduction

Reverse mentoring is an initiative where less experienced members of staff or students, mentor more experienced and senior staff about aspects of work with which they may be less familiar. The 2024 NIHR Southampton Biomedical Research Centre (BRC) Reverse Mentoring scheme was conducted to foster inclusivity across the BRC and partner organisations based on an established programme of reverse mentoring within the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Southampton.

It aimed to create the space and opportunities for honest, respectful and open dialogue between those in leadership roles and those in more junior roles. The scheme was also set up to give those in leadership roles greater insight into the experiences of more junior and/or underrepresented staff and students who may come from a socioeconomically disadvantaged or minority background.

The scheme involved staff and students affiliated to the BRC, Applied Research Collaboration (ARC), and Clinical Research Facility (CRF). Insights generated from this scheme and other iterations of the scheme will contribute to improving the equity, diversity and inclusion offering of the BRC and other organisations involved.

Scheme overview

Objectives

The objectives of the scheme were to:

1. Give those in leadership roles greater insight into the experiences of more junior and underrepresented staff working within the research community.

2. Provide an opportunity for personnel to engage in honest, open and respectful dialogue about the experiences of people from more disadvantaged and/or minority backgrounds and the barriers they can face.

3. Contribute to improving the educational and professional experience of our diverse staff community, increasing understanding and challenging exclusion.

Duration

The scheme ran from February 2024 to February 2025.

Participants

A total of 10 mentees matched to 10 mentors took part in the scheme.

Format of the mentoring scheme

Training session

An in-person training session for mentors and mentees was held on the 19th of February 2024 to kickstart the scheme. This training was organised by the Reverse mentoring scheme and collaborators from the University of Southampton. During the training, mentors and mentees were given a handbook which could help support and guide their conversations during the scheme. Training on unconscious bias, the mentoring relationship and the expectations of the scheme was also provided. A total of 14 mentors and 10 mentees were in attendance. The training took place over three hours and included an introductory session including both mentors and mentees. Then the group was split into mentors and mentees to enable mentors and mentees to focus on specific issues that would apply to each group. Finally, the training finished with the groups combining once again to conclude the day. The mentors and mentees were not aware of who they were paired with prior to, or by the end of the training session. Only mentors and mentees who attended the training were eligible to continue the scheme. A handbook for mentors was issued to mentors but not mentees. This was to facilitate control for mentors.

Mentoring meetings

Mentor and mentee pairs were encouraged to meet at least once a quarter, with flexibility to meet more frequently based on mutual preference. These meetings were self-organised by the pair. Mentors were expected to lead the conversations, guided by information provided in the mentor handbook. Mentees were expected to participate in the arrangement of these meetings themselves and not use personal administrative support to do this.

Mentor and mentee midway meetings

Two meetings (one for mentors and the other for mentees) were held halfway through the scheme at the end of June 2024. These meetings were held to understand mentor/mentee experiences, identify any challenges, gather any feedback from the scheme and to provide support where needed. Feedback from these meetings has been combined with those from the closure meetings to avoid duplication and to provide a cohesive summary.

Mentor and Mentee closure meeting

Independent closure meetings were held with mentors and mentees in April and May 2025, respectively, to formally conclude the scheme. The purpose of these meetings was

to gather reflections on how the scheme went, including challenges, positives, and suggestions for future iterations. A summary of this feedback, along with insights gathered throughout the scheme, is provided in the next section.

Feedback from the mentoring scheme

Mentee Feedback

Mentees found the reverse mentoring scheme to be a valuable and thought-provoking experience. It was widely acknowledged that it contributed to positive culture change and gave mentees unique insights into the lived experiences of people across the infrastructure. The scheme also prompted mentees to reflect on their practice and the way they work and lead, and to make changes where necessary. There was overall agreement and support for the scheme to be continued and expanded.

Challenges and proposed solutions

➢ Some mentees felt unclear about the structure and purpose of the mentor–mentee journey, particularly at the beginning of the scheme. They thought that initial communication could have been clearer in setting expectations about the scheme. Some mentees wanted access to the mentor handbook to help them understand the structure and plan for the meetings but were also aware that having this may shift the power dynamic.

➢ The four meeting per one year format of the scheme was perceived as too wide. Meetings were held so far apart that sometimes; they had to spend time remembering the previous discussion or catching up. There were also scheduling issues, and it was difficult finding a time that works between mentees and mentors. They thought that having mentors and mentees paired before the initial training meeting would be useful to help build rapport and to avoid some of the scheduling difficulties had.

➢ A few sessions were affected by perceived low confidence or inexperience on the part of the mentors. It was suggested that more support for mentors may have been useful to support them in the journey.

➢ There was more than one example of overtly racist events reported to mentees during mentor-mentee meetings. The specifics of these were not discussed during the midway and closure meetings but mentees agreed that immediate consideration be given to identify how to prevent such events from happening within the BRC and their other spheres of influence. The team should also ensure there is a clear way for both mentors and mentees to access support when such events are experienced or shared, and how to challenge such behaviours if they encounter it.

Positives of the scheme

➢ Mentees valued the honesty and openness of the conversations with mentors. Many reported that this helped increase their awareness of the challenges faced by students, more junior staff and people from under-represented groups.

➢ There was strong appreciation for mentors taking their time to be involved in the scheme, for their courage and insight and for openly having some difficult discussions which may be triggering for them.

➢ The experience of the scheme helped to foster empathy, reflection and shifts in leadership practices.

➢ There was broad consensus by mentees that the scheme be continued and be expanded.

➢ Discussions were had on how more people within the organisations could be encouraged to take part. It was also recommended that the team explored making participation in the scheme a requirement for future BRC theme leads.

➢ There was a real interest in understanding what the mentors have to say which led to a discussion about recruitment of mentors. Some discussions were had about how best to encourage more mentors across the organisations to take part especially those who are less frequently heard. This was taken forward as a point for consideration when recruiting for the next round.

Mentor feedback

Mentors also found the scheme 'brilliant' and were pleased to be contributing to changing the culture of the leaders in their organisations. While some reflected on the challenging start, citing their lack of experience in mentoring as well as the amount of information provided during the training as a reason, they remained enthusiastic about the scheme's continuation. Mentors also reflected on the impact of the scheme on their already demanding workloads and recommended that consideration be given to additional benefits mentors can derive from taking part in the scheme. Valuable recommendations for the next scheme were provided.

Challenges and proposed solutions

➢ **Maintaining engagement:** Mentors reported challenges in keeping session content fresh and meaningful across multiple meetings, especially when mentee-mentor pairs decided to have more than the four prescribed meetings. They mentioned that having just one midway meeting was insufficient and suggested that more frequent support sessions would have helped maintain momentum and provided opportunities for mentors to learn from each other.

- ➢ **Lack of Mentor Training:** There was a notable need for formal training in mentoring techniques, including how to navigate difficult conversations, challenge unconscious bias, and use effective questioning frameworks. Many mentors felt underprepared and would have welcomed skill-building opportunities. They also felt that such training would help them tailor conversations to their individual mentee needs and contexts.

- ➢ **Limited Peer Interaction:** Mentors and mentees wanted more chances to interact with their peers between meetings to share experiences and build community.

- ➢ **Programme Logistics:** Small details in programme delivery, such as seating arrangements during introductory sessions, sometimes unintentionally reinforced hierarchy and affected participants' sense of inclusion.

- ➢ **Understanding and Measuring Impact:** There was uncertainty about mentee motivations (career development vs. organizational change) and how the scheme's impact on EDI progress is tracked and reported.

Recommendations

Based on feedback from mentees and mentors, the following recommendations have been developed to inform future iterations of the reverse mentoring scheme:

- ➢ **Formal mentorship training:** Provide accessible training sessions focused on mentoring skills, managing difficult conversations, and effective challenge techniques for mentors before their participation in the scheme.

- ➢ **A flexible handbook:** Provide a reverse mentoring handbook which offers a general overview of the programme alongside a range of resources and ideas for mentors to adapt sessions flexibly.

- ➢ **Facilitate peer support meetings:** Schedule regular meetings and opportunities for mentors to connect, build community and share best practices throughout the programme.

- ➢ **Scheme launch meeting with mentors and mentees:** Improve introductory meetings to ensure all participants feel equally welcomed and valued. These meetings should focus on setting the scene for the programme and ensure mentors and mentees are well informed about what to expect and basic expectations of them while involved in the programme

- ➢ **Clarify mentee motivations and track outcomes:** Understand participants' goals better and implement mechanisms to measure and report on tangible EDI changes resulting from the scheme.

- ➢ **Increase meeting frequency by reducing the overall length of the programme**: Reduce the programme to six months with four to six meetings across the six months and offer mentee and mentor pairs scope of extending to on year where they deem it necessary.

- ➢ **Offer career-building incentives:** Consider formal mentor training certification or other career development benefits to encourage participation.

Conclusions and Next steps

The reverse mentoring programme was ultimately a successful one with a lot of valuable feedback from mentors and mentees to ensure future iterations are relevant and impactful. The scheme has now been adopted and will be led by the BRC EDI leads. A key next step is to co-produce the next scheme, with a planned launch in January 2026. A previous mentor will work with the EDI leads to help design the programme to maintain its relevance and effectiveness.