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Transcending hierarchies: mentorship as reciprocal growth

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ABSTRACT

This themed issue about mentorship includes nine articles and three reflections on practice. Mentorship of faculty, students, policy makers, and each other is at the core of academic development activities. The papers in this issue explore several themes, including benefits of mentorship for academics' teaching and research, as well as for the work of academic developers. The contributions emphasize the mutual benefits for both mentees and mentors, highlighting the importance of trust, reciprocity, and care. The development of a conceptual understanding of mentoring practices as 'eye-to-eye interactions' helps unearth pathways towards building connections that nurture everyone's voice, empowerment, and growth.

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Mentoring; trust; reciprocity; empowerment

The contributions to this issue of the *International Journal for Academic Development* centre around mentoring practices. Mentorship of faculty, students, policy makers, and each other is at the core of academic development activities. It represents the caring and trusting relationships academic developers build in the communities they support. Trust is an indispensable component of academic development and fundamental for learning and for societal well-being and – as such – it has been the topic of one of the recent special issues of the *IJAD* (Pleschová et al., 2025). However, it is constantly and potentially increasingly imperiled by multiple crises, political polarization, technological developments, and economic disparities. This is precisely why it is particularly important and desirable in these times to promote trust as a basis for the positive development of communities in academia and beyond. Trust is crucial for relationships and connections, and can emerge and grow in mutual partnerships with friends and colleagues. It is both a prerequisite and a result of reciprocal relationships that bear the transformative potential to transcend hierarchies. Such reciprocal relationships are characterized by what we would call 'eye-to-eye interactions', metaphorically indicating reciprocity and 'mutually beneficial exchange' (Dean & Timmermans, 2022, p. 217), as opposed to more 'eye-to-mouth interactions', metaphorically describing hierarchical master-apprentice mentoring practices.

The contributions to this issue highlight increased attention to the value and nature of mentoring relationships across several holistically broad areas of academic development (cf. Sutherland, 2018). They are examples for a wider understanding of ‘mentoring’, expanding from mentoring as a hierarchical relationship between mentor and mentee, towards egalitarian trust building and mutuality in mentoring relationships. Mentoring is a powerful practice in higher education and beyond because it supports growth of all. Mentoring is based on care and trust, and progresses through affinity and empathy (cf. Keijzer et al., 2021). There has been a long tradition of research and a significant number of papers written about mentoring programs for students (e.g. Gershenfeld, 2014; Lunsford et al., 2017), for faculty (e.g. Pleschová & McAlpine, 2015), on the required qualities of mentors (e.g. Deng & Turner, 2024), and on possible benefits for mentees and mentors (e.g. Kalpazidou Schmidt & Faber, 2016). For the academic development community, mentoring concepts have been, and are, continually of central interest. They aim at different target groups, vary regarding their organizational and structural features, and range from informal and dyadic to programmatic and group-based formats. The term ‘mentoring’ can be understood in a broader sense, too, as including different types of peer-to-peer, as well as tutoring, formats. This wider conceptualization underlies the collection of contributions to this issue of *IJAD*. The articles all have in common a description or analysis of mentoring formats that are trust building and designed on an eye-to-eye level. Mentees and mentors both contribute to and learn from the experience, and learning is perceived as a reciprocal and collaborative process. Truly transformative mentoring practices rely on trustful relationships, empathy, and mutual understanding – while still recognizing the reality and power dynamics of the systems within which they need to operate. Furthermore, mentoring practices encourage a multidirectional dynamic exchange of knowledge and experience, benefiting all participants in their own development.

The contributions in this themed issue revolve around the variety of competencies and roles in mentoring, representing, in a broad sense, many of the fields and communities in which academic developers work (cf. Le-May Sheffield & Serbati, 2022). We discuss the contributions organized along the communities they embrace.

The contributions by Du et al. (2025), Reimann et al. (2025), Dollinger and Hanna (2025), and Le and Benson (2025) reflect on how mentoring and peer-learning approaches enhance the *teaching competencies* of participants. In their exploratory study of a problem-based learning academic development program at a Danish University, Du, Chen, Stegeager, Thomsen, Guerra, Telléus, and Juhlet highlight mentors’ conceptions of good mentorship. Generic characteristics of positive mentoring behaviors include active listening, constructive feedback, and mutual respect. Du and colleagues identify three typical mentoring practices: providing feedback from one’s own experience, supporting the mentee’s self-reflection and responsibility, and co-creating and mediating. Reimann et al. (2025) explore the contributions of facilitators in collective reflection sessions on teaching in higher education, specifically using the ‘intercultural teaching process recall’ method. This exploration suggests that understanding the multifaceted role of facilitators is crucial for creating effective environments for collective reflection among peers and improving teaching practices. Working from a students-as-partners approach at a university in Australia, Dollinger and Hanna (2025) paired faculty requesting a student mentor with 100 students with

disabilities. The students shared their experiences and insights to assist in enhancing inclusion in course design and teaching practices. This approach created a relationship-rich focus that resonated with faculty and students in a way that surveys asking students about their experiences of disability have not, and thus the authors argue this mentoring arrangement is more likely to prompt faculty understanding, learning, and change than would the utilization of survey data to the same end. Students participating in this project, however, did raise concerns about the extent to which changes were implemented and they recommended collection and distribution of ideas beyond the individual conversations. In their *Reflection on Practice*, Le and Benson share assumptions and lessons learned from their experience with a developmental program about peer observation of teaching. They illustrate possible interventions to better scaffold critical reflection by addressing emotional challenges, introducing guided stages, and incorporating reflective prompts that encourage educators to ponder the ‘why’ rather than the ‘what’ in their teaching practices and decisions.

The contributions by Vandermaas-Peeler and Moore (2025) and Jones and Munro (2025) examine *mentoring competencies* of academics. In an interview study with faculty, Vandermaas-Peeler and Moore explore perceived benefits and challenges of mentoring undergraduate students in a constellation model, applying a construct originally developed in the workplace to the context of higher education. Moving away from hierarchical ‘one-mentor to one-mentee’ models, mentoring constellation approaches highlight how multiple relationships can support different mentoring functions. The authors discuss six themes with key academic development implications in terms of both supporting benefits and addressing challenges. Situated in a UK university, Jones and Munro argue in their *Reflection on Practice* that personal tutoring (in a broader sense, also part of mentoring) is a key practice of any teaching staff member. Thus, academic developers should explicitly instruct and train staff members for this ‘pastoral’ key element of university teaching.

How to enhance *research practices* through mentoring approaches is described in the contributions of Proffitt et al. (2025) and Golding (2025). In many contexts, writing groups are used to bolster faculty writing productivity. The study by Proffitt, Boone, Janes, Hall, Lemoins, and Dunn was conducted at a university in the USA where a longstanding cohesive writing group was active. This in-depth interview study with the group members shows the factors that lead to the success of this writing group. This exploration shows that peer mentoring is a powerful approach to personal and professional growth. Golding describes an educational design research initiative to develop a series of workshops for doctoral advisors. This study shows that sharing experiences in collaborative workshops and scholarly reflection on practice enhance both agency and independence of doctoral advisors, an approach that is transferable to other university contexts.

Heinrich et al. (2025) specifically describe mentoring processes to foster *reviewer competencies*. In a ‘group-based journal review’, Heinrich, Hill, Kelder, and Picard present a unique approach to reviewing for a new SoTL-focused journal, which enables the mentoring of colleagues into this process. Through conversation, a group of reviewers, with greater and lesser experience in reviewing, share their perspectives and come to a joint agreement about a particular paper. This approach suggests that while the mentor

may have something to teach early researchers, the less-experienced reviewers may also bring valuable insights to the review of a manuscript, balancing both experience and new perspectives in the review process.

Webb and Welsh (2025), as well as Bosanquet and Harvey (2025), describe how mentoring and peer collaboration can improve *academic developers'* work. Drawing from their ten-year collaboration, Webb and Welsh illuminate how they navigated 'onstage' and 'backstage' experiences of tensions as teaching and learning professionals. Richly situated in dialogue, liminality, and reflection, their narrative self-portraiture analyses identity development within their activity systems, and traces considerations about ambiguity, adaptability, passion, and friendship. Implications for mentorship at all career stages include the key role played by opportunities for connection within and beyond institutions in developing belonging within landscapes of practice. And in their *Reflection on Practice*, Bosanquet and Harvey present a reflective account of integrating distributed leadership with reciprocal peer review among academic developers to enhance a massive open online course on contemporary university teaching. By engaging with academic developers and learning designers, the authors demonstrate how this integrated approach fosters the quality of the learning materials, enhances decision-making, and builds leadership capacity. This example illustrates how peer review on eye level advances scholarship in complex academic development contexts.

Finally, Dyson et al. (2025) present a comprehensive mentoring program aimed at a bundle of *competencies to achieve a successful teaching and research career*. In their evaluation of a mentoring programme, Dyson, Westoby, Collins, Vakaj, Millman, Akinbobola, Skinner, Windsor, and Cowdell look at how to best support early career women researchers, who continue to be more challenged in achieving academic success, compared to male researchers. Participants in their Programme for Women Achieving Excellence in Research (PoWER) increased confidence, productivity, and work-life balance from connecting with more experienced academics as well as peer mentors. The authors urge more academic development interventions like this programme be created by academic developers to support women academics' career progression.

Overall, the contributions in this issue focus on mentoring practices in a large variety of areas in academic development. Many, if not all, contributions emphasize the mutual benefits for both mentees and mentors. Understanding the value of the contributions of each stakeholder in the mentoring practice will lead to equal relationships that elevate the voices and growth of all. The development of a conceptual understanding of mentoring practices as 'eye-to-eye interactions' helps to empower people to find their academic voice, build connections, and establish relationships. These democratic mentoring practices strengthen academics relationships and sense of belonging with each other and within their communities (cf. Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). The contributions in this issue show that collaboration and support have many benefits and have a significant impact on our academic communities and to the quality we aim for in our academic endeavours.

Following the *International Journal for Academic Development's* Special Issue on 'Trust in and through Academic Development' (Issue 1, 2025), other issues in Volume 30 will be also organized thematically. This issue on mentorship is the first, with others to follow on 'Resilience and Equity in Academic Development' (Issue 3) and 'Academic Development Scholarship and Measurement in a Complex World' (Issue 4).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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