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# Chapter 9

## Working with Others

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### INTRODUCTION

As part of their everyday work, lecturers, tutors and demonstrators alike are in frequent contact with a wide range of university colleagues on whose knowledge and experience they rely in carrying out their responsibilities effectively.

Figure 1 shows in graphic form the many different colleagues with whom part-time teachers are likely to interact for a variety of purposes. Course leaders and lecturers, for example, are a vital source of information on curriculum and teaching matters. Liaison with library staff is important in clarifying arrangements for access for students to appropriate reading and study materials. And secretaries and technicians are not only a key source of support as far as teaching materials, equipment or facilities are concerned, but can also advise on the practicalities of getting things done and where to go for further assistance – the sort of information which (sometimes embarrassingly) is known to everyone except the newest member of staff and which therefore tends to be taken for granted.

Elsewhere in this handbook – and particularly in chapters 2, *Roles and Responsibilities*, and 7, *Supporting and Advising Students* – we have discussed some of the individuals who can play a pivotal role in this network of contacts. Here we look in more detail at two groups of colleagues who have a particular contribution to make to the development of the part-time teacher's professional expertise: mentors, and other tutors and demonstrators in the same department or faculty.

### WORKING WITH A MENTOR

A mentor is usually an experienced senior academic whose function is to offer guidance and support to a less experienced colleague (a mentee or protégé). In the present context, the main aim of mentoring is to assist new tutors or demonstrators in a variety of ways in developing their professional expertise.

Defined in this way, mentoring hardly seems a novel idea. Indeed, many senior academics may be surprised to learn that their long-time habit of taking less experienced staff under their wing is

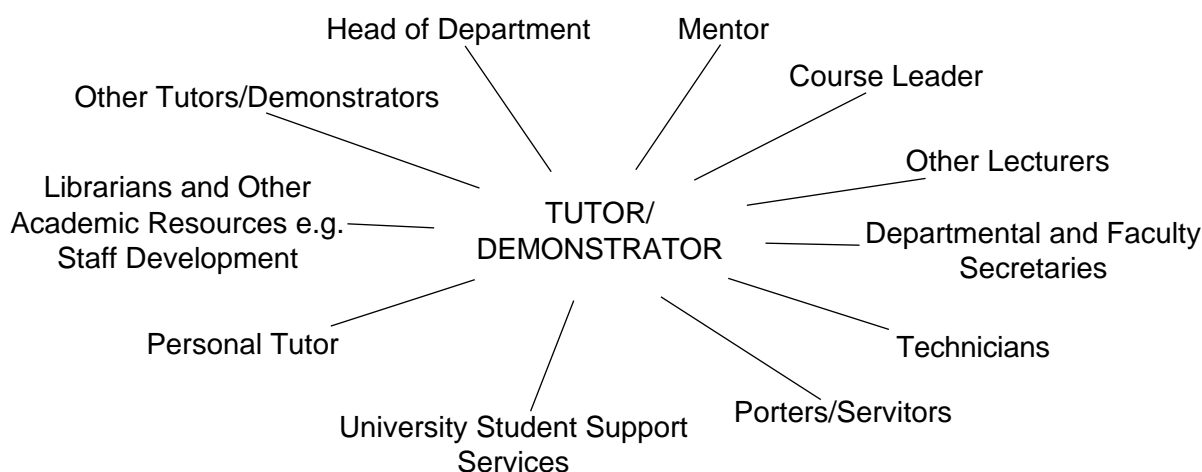


Figure 1

nowadays called 'mentoring'. What distinguishes mentoring in current parlance, however, is that arrangements which were customarily informal – and, it should be said, reliant on the goodwill and commitment of certain colleagues – have become more formalised.

Being part of a mentoring scheme has many potential benefits to offer to new postgraduate and other part-time staff. These benefits include opportunities to:

- become more swiftly acclimatised into the procedures and practices of a department and a faculty;
- gain encouragement from consultation and guidance;
- develop and refine one's professional skills by drawing on the experience and expertise of a mentor;
- talk through and review, at regular intervals, issues and concerns which have arisen during day-to-day work;
- improve one's self confidence with the support and advice of a senior colleague.

Some examples may help to show how mentoring works in practice. During the initial orientation period, for instance, a mentor can help by clarifying the tutor's or demonstrator's specific roles and responsibilities and – just as importantly – advising on where the boundaries to these responsibilities lie, since enthusiastic new staff are more likely to attempt too much than to do too little. The mentor can also help initiate the new colleague into the inner workings of the department, offer briefing on course content and teaching methods, and provide an introduction to other members of the course team.

Once teaching is underway, mentors can help out with queries about marking criteria and assessment practices, monitor the marking of reports and essays, and advise on teaching strategies or techniques for handling problem students. Mentors may also be willing, when invited to do so, to give candid and constructive feedback on their mentee's teaching.

Clearly the potential exists for mentor and mentee to work together fruitfully on a great variety of issues, but there can be a danger of over-burdening the relationship when expectations are unrealistic or demands excessive.

An agreed way of working needs to be established if both parties are to make the most of the

relationship. Frank and complete discussions at the outset can go a long way towards getting mentor and mentee off to a strong start, and it is therefore a good idea to use the first meeting to arrive at a clear understanding of purposes and procedures.

If it is to be helpful to you, the initial meeting with your mentor should be an opportunity not just to get to know one another but also to:

- talk through your teaching contract and clarify any uncertainties;
- become acquainted with relevant departmental policies and practices;
- establish guidelines for the mentoring relationship;
- agree when you will next meet and what issues ought to be on the agenda.

A variety of specific issues will also need to be clarified, either at the initial meeting or subsequently, once regular meetings are underway. These issues include:

- how much time is to be set aside for mentoring;
- how often the two of you should meet, and for how long;
- what will be expected of each of you if the mentoring relationship is to work well;
- how confidential matters are best dealt with;
- issues that are off-limits as far as the mentoring relationship is concerned (e.g. personal matters);
- how you can keep in touch outwith your regular meetings;
- how to take stock of how well the mentoring relationship is working, for each of you.

By its very nature, a mentoring relationship will develop and change over time. It is therefore important that the relationship is a two-way professional one, implying the mutual sharing of thoughts and ideas. Too one-sided a relationship, or expectations that are unclear or unrealistic, can lead to disenchantment and even failure.

*What priorities would you like to address at your first meeting with your mentor (assuming that you have not yet formally met) ?*

## CONTACTS WITH OTHER TUTORS AND DEMONSTRATORS

Informal networks of contacts can be just as valuable as formal ones, and meeting other demonstrators and tutors regularly to share experiences can also be a good source of advice and support, for you personally and for them. And a network of contacts becomes especially helpful when someone is working in a department which does not operate a mentoring scheme, or where widely scattered office and teaching accommodation or workload pressures make liaison with other academic staff difficult.

As with all informal support groups, the content and nature of activities will reflect the interests and concerns of those involved. For example, simply having the opportunity to voice anxieties about the amount of written work to be marked by a given date or the adequacy of students' class preparation may be enough to reassure the new staff member that her or his concerns are not unusual and are shared by others. There can also be profit from pooling growing know-how about the workings of the department, the faculty and the wider university. And getting to know other tutors and demonstrators can be a marvellous source of ideas about running tutorials or labs: how to encourage students to prepare more meticulously, for instance, and what advice to give to students on revising for class tests and end-of-year examinations. Lastly, where tutors or demonstrators work in the same department, it may be feasible to share resources such as desk space, course texts and computing and/or laboratory equipment.

How far a new part-time teacher will wish to make use of opportunities to explore insights and concerns with others is nonetheless an individual

matter. Some will feel – sometimes justifiably! – that they have sufficient confidence and expertise to get on with the job independently, drawing on the various sources of information and advice outlined elsewhere in the handbook. But there will also be many who welcome the possibility of confiding in others, and relish the prospect of being part of an informal support group.

Many departments have been quick to recognise the benefits of regular contacts with and between new staff. Some take a lead in hosting or helping to convene meetings of new tutors and demonstrators, or in putting them in touch with old hands – those with a year or more's experience and who therefore already know the ropes. Some departments also regularly organise events such as discussion forums or social gatherings where part-time teachers of all kinds can meet with other academic staff.

Integration of part-time staff into the mainstream of academic affairs is sometimes more readily achieved in small rather than large departments. In small departments with few postgraduates, however, opportunities to interact with peers may be correspondingly limited, and looking beyond the department becomes a virtual necessity. Taking part in workshops or seminars is one useful option. These events are often designed to meet the needs of a particular faculty or school and provide opportunities to meet with colleagues from a wide range of academic disciplines.

*What initial concerns do you feel you would like to share with other demonstrators/tutors?*

*Is there anything you could do to promote contacts with fellow demonstrators/tutors in your department?*

