

Career mentoring and sponsorship: *A resource for academics and graduate researchers*

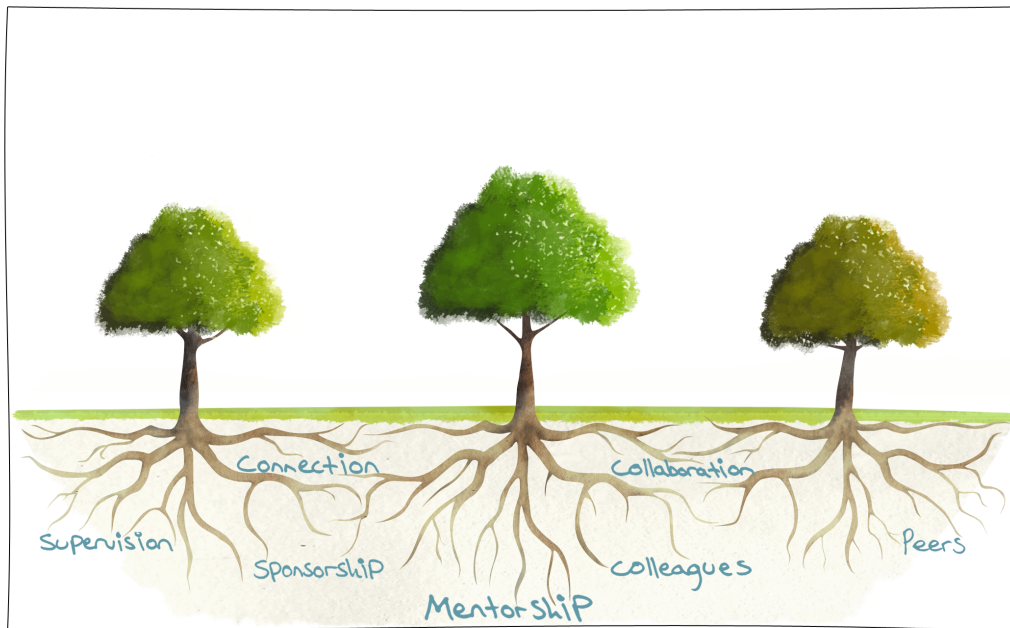


Image: Scott McKendrick

Mentoring and sponsorship work as a network of relationships that support the career health and function of each person and supports the growth of the school...much like the root systems of trees that provide nourishment to the individual tree (a person and their career) and communicate and support the growth of neighbouring trees in a community to develop the health of the forest (school).

This is an adapted excerpt (with permission) from:

Lee K., Rawluk A, de Vries J, Bal P, Bennett LT, & Fletcher T. (2022). Career mentoring and sponsorship in SEFS: A resource for academics and graduate researchers. Report prepared by the Mentoring and Sponsorship Working Group for the School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences, Faculty of Science, The University of Melbourne. Parkville, Victoria, Australia.

The full report can be downloaded at

<http://jendevries.com/publications-full/career-mentoring-sponsorship>

Introduction to mentoring and sponsorship

1.1 Mentoring versus sponsorship

Mentoring is a learning relationship where one person takes an interest in the development and career of the other, and spends time listening, supporting, providing another perspective, guiding, challenging, and talking through strategies and career opportunities. Sponsorship, on the other hand, is the active creation of career-enhancing opportunities. The sponsor draws on their networks, resources, social capital, power (the ability to affect others) and influence on behalf of and for the benefit of the other (Figure 1).

Both mentoring and sponsorship are important for enabling a person's intended career trajectory. Mentoring without sponsorship provides support and a sense of career direction, without the opportunities required to progress. Sponsorship without mentoring can result in opportunities that are not well matched to a person's ambitions or their desired career path and circumstances or may even result in too many opportunities without the support to think strategically or discern what is right for the person.

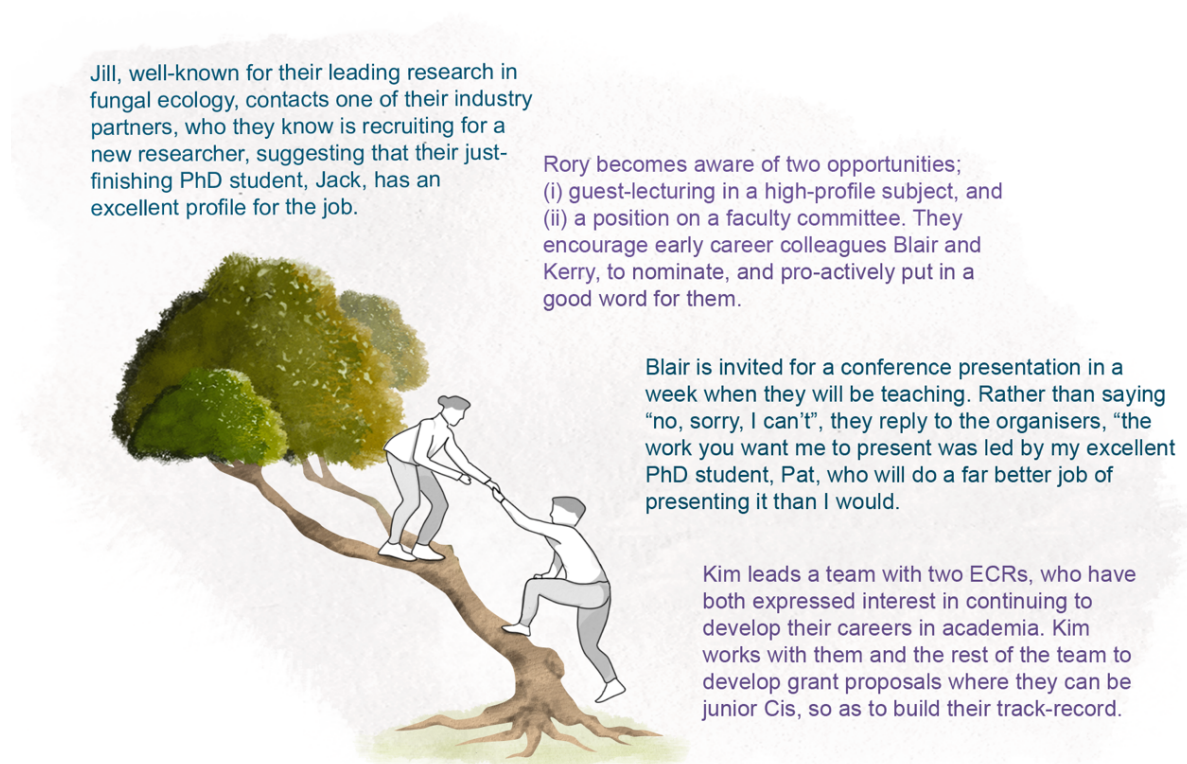


Figure 1. Examples of career sponsorship in academia (image: Scott McKendrick).

1.2 Why is it important to distinguish between mentoring and sponsorship?

It is now recognised that sponsorship is critical to career success. Research has shown that while some people receive both mentoring and sponsorship in mentoring relationships, others don't¹, leaving some at a significant career disadvantage. *The role of sponsorship in shaping careers can be overlooked unless we treat it as separate to mentoring.*

Identifying sponsorship as a distinct entity has the advantage of making it, or the lack of it, visible and discussable. This can help everyone involved to understand the importance of sponsorship, as distinct from mentoring, in progressing careers. A separate focus on sponsorship also helps to identify the gaps within current systemic processes for career progression.

Sponsorship can be far less visible than mentoring, as it involves techniques such as networking among colleagues on behalf of another, rather than obvious “meetings” or “mentoring sessions”.

It is also known that some people may be great sponsors but poor mentors, and vice versa. Recognising that sponsorship and mentoring are separate roles and require different but complementary skill sets is helpful in identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the organisation towards providing support for enabling career trajectories.

1.3 Building a developmentally oriented culture

Leaders and supervisors often have the greatest capacity to mentor and sponsor; however, they should never be just one person's responsibility. Careers take place within webs of enabling relationships. Peers can mentor and sponsor each other, and seniority needn't be a prerequisite for acting as a mentor or sponsor for others. Everyone needs to be involved, everyone forms part of 'the enabling-ecosystem'.

It is important to develop everyone's understanding of how mentoring and sponsorship works in careers, to support the development of mentoring and sponsorship skills and to develop a culture where mentoring and sponsorship sit at the centre of building a developmentally oriented culture, where all staff can thrive and make their best contribution.

¹ Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. (2010). Why men still get more promotions than women. *Harvard Business Review*, 88(9), 80-85.

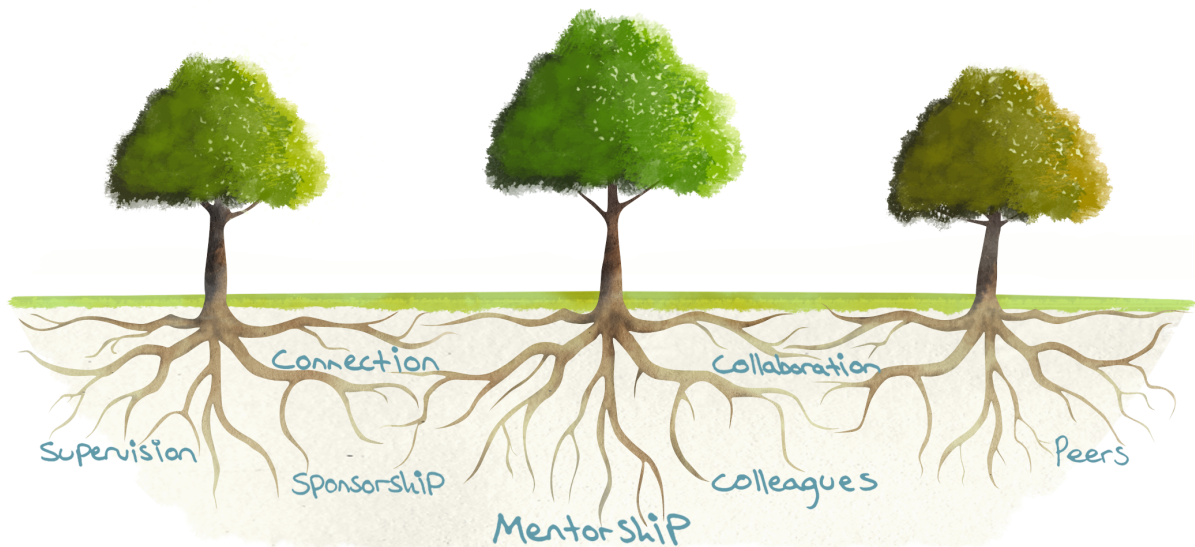


Figure 2. Surviving and thriving in academia is achieved through curating a person’s web of enabling relationships or ‘the enabling-ecosystem’. This includes supervisors and peers, as well as access to formal and informal mentors and sponsors (image: Scott McKendrick).

There are aspects of how groups and schools operate that can provide effective scaffolding or foundations for building these enabling relationships. Research by de Vries² has shown that these include healthy social and scientific communities, networks of user friendly ‘go to’ people that assist colleagues, and an understanding of the written and informal rules that govern academic environments. The de Vries model of career sponsorship will be explored further in later sections.

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2 Mentoring and sponsorship in Higher Education³

2.1 Mentoring approaches

Research conducted by de Vries⁴ identified that the most commonly adopted approach to mentoring is a traditional or instrumental approach, where a senior person instructs or advises a more junior colleague on how to succeed, based on how they themselves have

² For a full list of publications by Jennifer de Vries: <https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=z4ASjUcAAAAJ&hl=en> or visit jendevries.com/publications

³ de Vries, J., & Binns, J. (2018). Sponsorship: Creating Career Opportunities for Women in Higher Education. Universities Australia Executive Women (UAEW): <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/UAEW-Sponsorship-Guide.pdf>

⁴ de Vries, J. (2010). A Realistic agenda? Women only programs as strategic interventions for building gender equitable workplaces. PhD thesis, University of Western Australia Business School.

built a successful academic career, and on their experience of how universities work. *Traditional mentoring* is a replicatory model, often reinforcing the notion of an 'ideal' academic and a narrow range of ways to succeed.

Fewer people adopt a more developmental approach to mentoring, from here on referred to as *developmental mentoring*. This relationship-based and guiding approach still draws on the knowledge and wisdom of the other person (colleague, mentor, supervisor etc), but leaves much more room for the mentee to work out their own way forward. This approach is more responsive to the individual, the current context including funding regime and employment possibilities (inside and outside academia), and more adaptive to the ongoing changes in higher education. It is a more future-proof and agile approach. This style of mentoring can be more demanding of the mentor's time and requires greater skill.

2.2 Problems with current mentoring practices

Traditional mentoring works best for mentees, PhD students or supervisees, who can (and want to) follow in the footsteps of their mentor/supervisor/Professor and thus build a similar career. However, it works less well for those who aren't able or don't want to follow this path. Differences in age, gender, context (e.g., funding regimes, employment prospects), career mobility, aspirations, personal circumstances etc, all undermine the effectiveness and thus appropriateness of this approach. It can be alienating and contribute to feelings of not belonging and not having what it takes to succeed.

Developmental mentoring is less common in academia. For many this is an unfamiliar approach to mentoring, and one they have not personally experienced. In addition, they may not have had the opportunity to develop the skills required to be a developmental mentor or may find this approach too time consuming.

The complexity of building a successful academic career within a competitive career structure, the lack of diversity in career paths that have been seen as successful, and the time-poor nature of academia, have all contributed to reinforcing the predominance of the traditional mentoring approach. However, developmental mentoring is required to broaden and re-define pathways to success, to achieve more equitable, diverse and inclusive universities, and to adapt to an ever-changing landscape.

2.3 Sponsorship approaches

Sponsorship is critical for academic progression and success, as it provides access to the right opportunities at the right time. These opportunities are required early in academic

careers and are critical to employment outcomes after PhD completion⁵ and in establishing a lasting academic career. Postgraduate students and junior colleagues are particularly dependent on senior colleagues for many of these opportunities e.g., inclusion on grants, opportunities to contribute to book chapters, teaching opportunities, introductions to the right people in the field, etc. For academics at the early career stage, senior colleagues who are closely aligned in the discipline make particularly suitable sponsors.

Traditional sponsorship, much like traditional mentoring draws on past models of success, often assumes what is best for the individual and provides opportunities that work best for those able to tread a more normative linear career path. *Developmental sponsorship* is more responsive to individual needs, crafting more diverse paths to success, and is more focussed on providing the right opportunity at the right time for the individual.

We know that access to sponsorship is highly variable in universities, ranging from brilliant to entirely absent, and that the absence of sponsorship can be career-breaking, often resulting in stagnation and exit.

Sponsorship practices play a critical role in determining who succeeds in meeting their career aspirations in and beyond academia.

2.4 Problems with current sponsorship practices

Sponsorship within academia is currently largely ad-hoc, unstructured and left to the initiative of individual leaders and supervisors. Some see sponsorship as discretionary, while others consider it as a systematic duty (i.e., a responsibility they have to all the staff and postgraduate researchers they supervise).

Informal processes that lack accountability, accompanied by a lack of transparency, increase the risk of bias (particularly affinity bias), which can result in winners and losers. Women and minority groups are most at risk of missing out in this situation.

Organisational rewards are often more aligned to individual success, and leaders are not necessarily recognised or valued for their development of others. This works against leaders developing inclusive and developmental sponsorship practices, which takes more reflection, time, and effort to tailor to individual needs.

Not all academic leaders are equally well positioned to offer sponsorship, perhaps due to flow-on effects from their own lack of sponsorship. They may have, for example, limited international academic networks or less access to funding.

⁵ Dever, Maryanne, Laffan, Warren, Boreham, Paul, Behrens, Karin, Haynes, Michele, Western, Mark, and Kubler, Matthias (2008). Gender differences in early post-PhD employment in Australian Universities: The influence of PhD experience on women's academic careers: Final report. Action Plan for Women Employed in Universities 2006-10. St Lucia, Qld, Australia: University of Queensland.

Sponsorship can also be problematic when it is motivated by the needs/desires of the sponsor, rather than the recipient. Tasks that are delegated without consideration of the benefits to the recipient is just delegation, and sometimes this is required. However thoughtful delegation may be sponsorship. Dressing delegation up as sponsorship, that is selling it as a good opportunity to meet the needs of the 'sponsor' can be exploitative, have negative career outcomes and lead to long-term resentment and conflict.

These potential disparities in sponsorship capacity, motivations and susceptibility to bias highlight the need for formalised expectations and processes to support sponsorship.

2.5 The role of programs in facilitating mentoring and sponsorship

Mentoring programs are a popular intervention in higher education. They have a valuable place, assisting in building mentoring and sponsorship skills and practices. They often provide access to senior people as *formal mentors* (matched and assigned), and peer mentoring can provide access to peers in other parts of the faculty or institution. These relationships would not otherwise naturally occur and have a number of advantages. They can provide invaluable mentoring and occasionally sponsorship, strengthen networks, provide fresh perspectives, and are devoid of any conflicts of interest or competition that can occur closer to home.

Such programs strengthen the web of enabling relationships but are not a replacement for the *informal mentoring relationships* (occurring naturally without being 'matched') within the discipline that are so essential to career progress. Neither can they replace the role of the supervisor as a primary mentor and sponsor of GR students and staff.

Leaders play a critical role in creating workplace structures and cultures that can facilitate and support the development of these informal discipline-based relationships, and support supervisors in their role.

3 What are we aspiring to?

3.1 A healthy ecosystem

Mentoring and sponsorship work as a network of relationships that support the career health and function of each person and supports the growth of the school. This is much like the root systems of trees (plant and fungi) that provide nourishment to the individual tree (a person and their career) and communicate and support the growth of neighbouring trees in a community to develop the health of the forest (school).

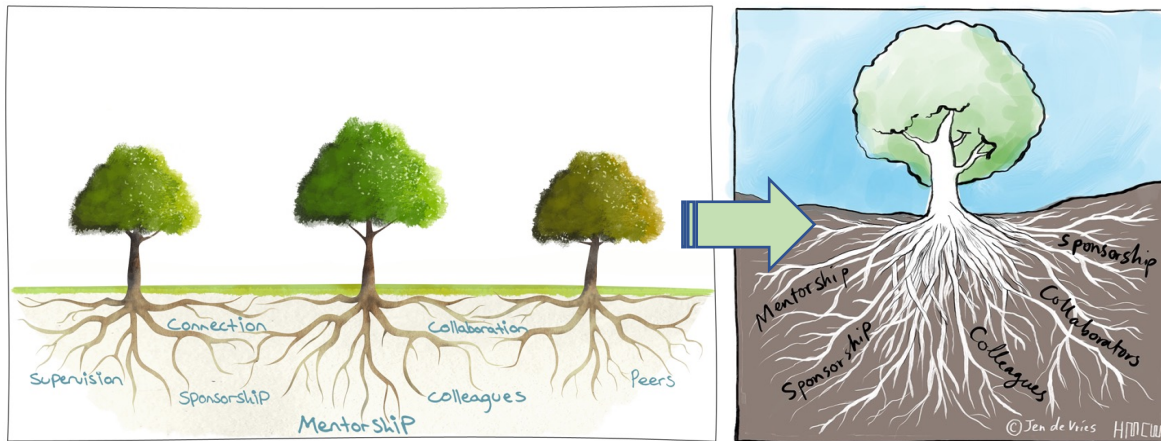


Figure 3. Mentoring and sponsorship create a healthy career ecosystem, which in turn leads to healthy individuals (images: Scott McKendrick, Hamish McWilliam © Jen de Vries).

A healthy ecosystem of developmental mentoring and sponsorship provide benefits to those who receive them, to those who provide them, and to creating an inclusive and enabling culture within the organisation. Given this, effective mentoring and sponsorship will create happier and more productive staff and teams. They will enhance career trajectories and flexibility. Indeed, local and international examples show that groups with a strong culture of supporting the careers of others consistently have high *performance*. Both the providers and recipients of sponsorship in these groups tend to have better career track records.

Building this healthy ecosystem is a co-responsibility, where the individual, supervisors, leaders, and the practices of the school all contribute. Individuals understand the role of mentoring and sponsorship in careers, are proactive in building webs of enabling relationships, and recognise they are both receivers and givers of sponsorship.

Mentoring and sponsorship is understood to be everyone's responsibility, while still recognising that some have more capacity than others. A cascade model that engages everyone is encouraged, where leaders set the tone, and colleagues mentor and sponsor peers and more junior colleagues, at all levels.

Within this ecosystem, everyone can build a customised career inside or outside academia. They are supported to think and reflect, make strategic choices and be proactive, in line with their personal circumstances, ambitions, and disciplinary interests. They have access to opportunities that support their aspirations wherever possible.

3.2 Conceptual framework: the *de Vries model*

The de Vries model pairs developmental mentoring with developmental sponsorship. However, rather than seeing mentoring and sponsorship as something that occurs just between individuals, the model includes elements of an ecosystem (or *scaffolding*) that will support and enable mentoring and sponsorship practices. The work of building the scaffolding and the enabling mentoring and sponsorship practices become shared between individuals, supervisors, leaders, and the school as a community.

3.2.1 A developmental approach to mentoring and sponsorship

The move away from the more traditional approaches to mentoring and sponsorship towards developmental mentoring paired with sponsorship, requires building an ecosystem or scaffolding, as indicated below.

While individual staff and groups may already be aligned with a developmental approach, it will still require significant changes in how individuals, supervisors, and leaders think about careers and cultures, and how the school supports careers to make this a more universally adopted approach.

The opportunity – and indeed arguably the obligation, is to ensure that all staff have access to high levels of development mentoring and sponsorship. Each aspect of the de Vries model and what can be aspired to is outlined below.

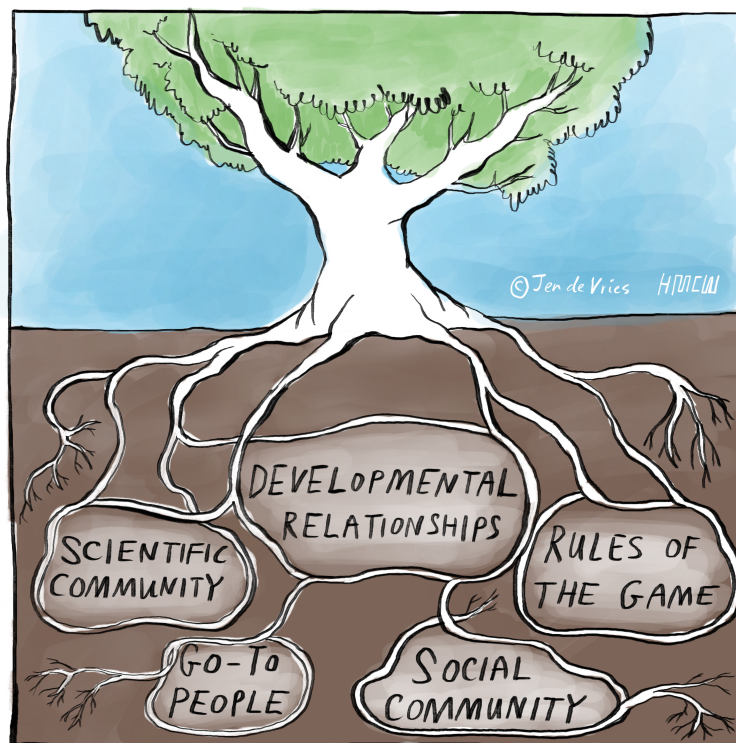


Figure 4. The de Vries model for building a developmental approach to career mentoring and sponsorship, indicating other enabling aspects of the ecosystem. (image: Hamish McWilliam © Jen de Vries).

Developmental mentoring can occur in different contexts and with different colleagues. It may be part of a supervisory relationship, take place during a coffee chat between peers, or be part of the performance development review process. These conversations are based on establishing a trusting relationship, providing time and a safe space to explore current issues and future aspirations. The underlying assumption is that the person can be guided and supported to find their own way forward, rather than being advised what to do. Sponsorship needs may emerge during this process, leading to the next step of identifying these needs and finding suitable sponsors. Sponsorship may be provided by the mentor, but this needn't always be the case.

Developmental sponsorship can be a collaborative, legitimised practice, where all leaders are expected and enabled to sponsor. The culture is driven by the desire to provide the right sponsorship at the right time, and at all career stages, so that everyone can thrive and reach their potential. Opportunities may be allocated to the person most in need of a development opportunity and may be used to support a broader range of individuals and career paths. This approach to sponsorship is a more reflective and intentional practice and can include checks and balances regarding inherent biases.

Developmental sponsorship is an inclusive practice that prioritises equity in providing opportunities to the wider community, rather than confining opportunities to those who best fit past models of academic career success.

It is acknowledged sponsorship takes time, work, leadership deliberations, and resources. Leaders and senior staff must work together to ensure people do not fall through the cracks. The organisational unit must put appropriate policies and practices in place to strengthen a developmental culture and support mentoring and sponsorship practices, for example by placing a greater emphasis on these approaches in the selection of leaders, PDR processes, and through supervisory arrangements. Furthermore, implementation of developmental approaches to sponsorship requires that leaders and supervisors are (1) supported in developing inclusive sponsorship practices, (2) held accountable, and (3) valued and rewarded for excellence in M&S efforts and achievements.

Sponsorship must be visible and transparent, openly discussed, expectations clarified, and gaps identified and rectified where possible. This optimisation of sponsorship is essential to improving the performance and effectiveness of individuals and the organisation as a whole.

3.2.2 Scaffolding for building a developmental mentoring & sponsorship culture

Social community

A strong social community lays the foundation for people to feel they belong and can be their authentic selves at work. Particularly in difficult times, it helps us to care for and support each other because we know each other's circumstances and needs. A sense of belonging helps to build safety, trust, and connection. Inclusive social community breaks down the notion of "in" and "out" groups and contributes to dissolving affinity bias, as all people become known. Social community supports scientific community.

Scientific community

A healthy scientific community builds knowledge and skills, enables and welcomes contributions from people at all levels, breaks down disciplinary or group silos, creates linkages between people, and can contribute to building interdisciplinarity. It can act as a safety net, ensuring individuals are not totally reliant on their supervisor or group, while building connections between and reliance on peers not just senior academics. It is a place where it is safe to do blue-sky thinking, where new ideas can be tested, and independent thinking is encouraged and developed.

Go-to people

Identifying go-to people within schools and faculty can help reduce the frustration of navigating unfamiliar administrative tasks or apprehension of tackling new roles, all of which contribute to workload stress. This requires building rapport between academic, teaching and professional staff through informal catch-ups, deliberate induction processes and creating a culture of a cohesive School community.

Having a range of approachable go-to people builds connection and collegiality, improves the sharing of know-how and allows people to get on with their job effectively. It can create innovation across organisational units and contribute to building a supportive culture where good citizenship is valued.

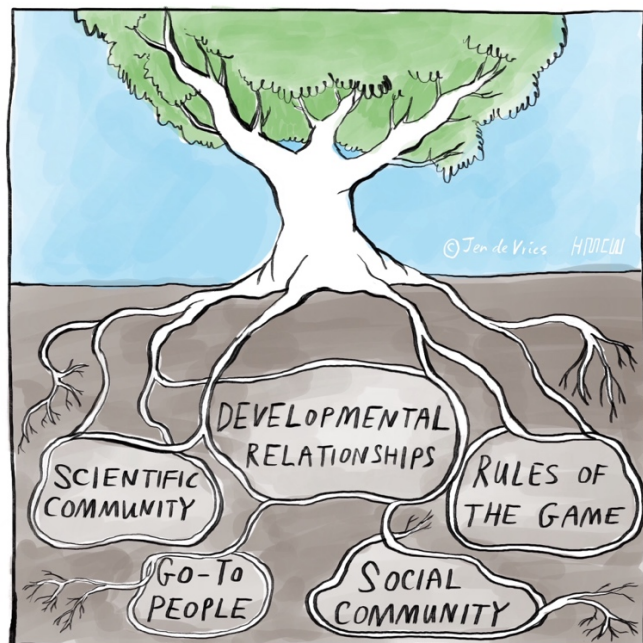
Rules of the game

Building a successful and sustainable academic career is complex and requires an understanding of various written and unwritten rules, for example PDR and promotion processes, finding and maintaining relationships with mentors, sponsors, and collaborators, effectively engaging with external partners, etc. This understanding underpins and enables a strategic approach to careers, where people can make informed choices regarding their careers and are active agents in building their careers.

On the following page, we provide a quick 'reference-card' of roles and responsibilities for Mentoring and Sponsorship for:

- *Individuals*
- *Supervisors*
- *Senior staff and committee members*
- *Senior Leaders (School Head and Executive)*
- *Faculty and University*

Academic Career Mentoring and Sponsorship: Roles, Responsibilities, and Actions



Development mentoring and sponsorship (M&S) involves roles for all members of the University community, and actions relating to both M&S itself but also the underlying scaffolding.

The de Vries model uses the analogy of an ecosystem enabling a healthy tree, where developmental mentoring and sponsoring relationships are supported or scaffolded by social and scientific community, networks of 'go-to' people and learning the 'rules of the game'.

In the following table, roles and actions are cumulative from left to right, acknowledging the multiple roles of individuals within and beyond a School. Enabling is offered from right to left, acknowledging that the Faculty and University support the School, which in turn supports senior staff, committees, and supervisors to support individual.

(image: Hamish McWilliam © Jen de Vries).

	Individuals	Supervisors	Senior staff and committee members	Senior leaders (School Head and Executive)	Faculty and University
Role	<p>Active participants in careers of self and others</p> <p><i>All staff and students share responsibility in developing the careers of their colleagues and should expect the same for themselves</i></p>	<p>Career enablers and relationship builders</p> <p><i>Supervisors are attuned to diverse career pathways and are responsive to individual circumstances and aspirations</i></p>	<p>Enablers of organisational culture</p> <p><i>Senior staff and committees facilitate and maintain enabling and developmental organisational culture</i></p>	<p>Visionaries and builders of organisational structure and culture</p> <p><i>Senior leaders build and implement culture and structures to facilitate robust M&S practices</i></p>	<p>Provider of organisational support and incentives to drive behaviours</p> <p><i>The University ensures adequate resourcing, and the appropriate values, priorities and policies are in place to fulfill diverse aspirations</i></p>

	Individuals	Supervisors	Senior staff and committee members	Senior leaders (School Head and Executive)	Faculty and University
Actions: Mentoring and sponsorship (M&S)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop awareness and skills of developmental M&S • Seek out and support sponsorship opportunities with peers, supervisors and colleagues irrespective of seniority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in ongoing discussions and learning about M&S, with a keen focus on developmental practices • Develop an intentional and reflective approach to sponsorship • Develop awareness of D&I issues • Practice active listening to understand supervisee aspirations and provide tailored support (to identify mentors, sponsors, career pathways and opportunities within and outside academia) • Convey the concept of career co-responsibility to supervisees • Identify potential external mentors and sponsors where appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for all staff and students to build awareness of D&I and M&S culture and practices • Identify how their committee can contribute to the work of enabling M&S • Ensure inclusiveness and accessibility of opportunities, keeping an eye on equity, transparency, and bias • Be aware of and facilitate collaboration between School and Faculty committees to build enabling cultures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and rectify gaps in M&S and any hindrances to building within-School enabling cultures • Fund M&S programs (existing and new if needed), and advertise M&S programs offered across the University • Provide frameworks, set expectations, oversee accountability, and support inclusion of M&S contributions in the PDR process • Develop structures and processes that enhance distributed and inclusive leadership and supervision • Recognise, value and reward excellent M&S efforts and achievements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-level messaging to support a University-wide culture of M&S and the valuing of diverse career paths • Increase the diversity of Academic Career Benchmark Indicators for mentoring, and develop indicators for sponsorship • Refine PDR and promotion processes to support M&S activities • Ensure equitable M&S opportunities
Actions: Scaffolding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build one's network within and beyond the school • Participate in what is offered by one's social & scientific community at the university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support supervisees to connect with and attend a diverse range of School/Faculty/University programs and events, and network with industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build social and scientific community, within and across areas of school • Lead by example and participate in events and programs that build the social and scientific community • Create opportunities for all staff to expand their community by providing links beyond the School/Faculty/University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorse initiatives that strengthen the social and scientific community • Ensure the School provides appropriate induction/onboarding processes for new staff/students. • Advocate for creation of opportunities across universities and with industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a diverse, inclusive, and connected academic community • Provide opportunities, guidance to pursue alternate academic/non-acad. career paths • Create cross-Faculty networking opportunities • Create opportunities for networking across universities and with industry