



# Vice-Chancellor's Mentoring Programme Best practice case studies

## Introduction and overview

The Vice-Chancellor's Mentoring Programme was launched in 2017 as part of the University of Nottingham's activities to develop an inclusive culture. It signalled a personal commitment from Vice-Chancellor Professor Shearer West CBE to support senior leaders with protected characteristics more fully.

An annual programme open to senior leaders across all job roles in the university, it combines personal 1:1 mentoring meetings with the Vice-Chancellor; shadowing a minimum of two senior university meetings – one of these being a University Executive Board meeting; Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessments; and connecting together as a mentee group.

Now in its third year, 26 individuals have been mentored personally by the Vice-Chancellor. 57 unsuccessful applicants have also been matched to alternative Executive Board and other senior leader mentors, demonstrating the university's continued commitment to supporting and developing the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda through personal connections.

This case study provides an insight into the experiences of one of the VC's mentees, their reasons for applying for the programme, and what they gained from the experience.

For further information about the University of Nottingham's Vice-Chancellor's Mentoring Programme, contact Carol Steed, Leadership and Management Director.  
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## **Q.** Why did you apply for the Vice-Chancellor's Mentoring Programme?

- A.** There were three motivations for my application:
- I was at a crossroads in my career. I have had senior leadership experience previously and am also (by some metrics seen as) a successful researcher. Increasingly I felt I had to choose between the two – either to be a researcher or to be a university leader. I felt the experience would help give me a better or more realistic idea of what senior level leadership at the university looked like; the challenges and frustrations. It was also an opportunity for me to reflect on own aptitude and readiness for a senior leadership role and the skills I might need to develop.
  - I felt there was a lack of senior leadership diversity at senior levels of the university and wanted to know why this was the case. I wanted to learn how to challenge this effectively and also how to support university initiatives that would improve diversity.

c. I wanted to demonstrate to members of the communities that I belong to that there is no glass ceiling to such senior leadership levels, and that with the right support and opportunities we can all achieve these positions.

**Q. Are there specific challenges you believe you faced that you thought this programme could help you overcome or deal with more effectively?**

**A.** If go back to my three motivations, then there are specific challenges related to each of these.

Firstly, the crossroads challenge, I felt I didn't have the required knowledge to help me make an informed decision as to whether to go one way or the other. I needed to have some real-world experience, have closer contact with someone with that level of experience in order to understand this dynamic better. Speaking to our VC, and finding out what her diary was like and the responsibilities she and other leaders have has provided useful insights. It has given me greater knowledge and also taught me more about myself and where the kinds of skills I need to work on which I didn't know before.

Secondly, as an ethnic minority, I don't see many people like me in these positions of power/leadership, so I wanted to find out if it really was possible for me to be in that type of position. I can certainly see that as a possibility now. Finally, where are our role models at the university for people in my community? I wanted to understand and potentially overcome any barriers and be a role model for others.

**Q. What has been the biggest impact for you that you have gained from your engagement with the programme?**

**A.** When I was undertaking the shadowing experiences, as a psychologist I found observing others to be professionally interesting, so sometimes it was hard to dissociate from this and bring the experiences back into my own learning. However, it has

given me a good sense of the challenges and dilemmas that senior leaders face when leading at senior levels across the university, including seeing the scale and scope of challenges that they are dealing with on an on-going basis. I saw university leaders 'at work' through observing meetings, and through this I was able to reflect on what kind of leader I wanted to be and what kind of leader I did not want to be. It helped me to think more deeply about who we do have at the helm of the organisation, how they operate and my observations of this. It made me consider whether I would make the same choices or decisions – sometimes I would and sometimes I wouldn't, and it was interesting to reflect on why this was the case.

I think the biggest impact was that it reaffirmed my conviction that the people in the university are our biggest asset, and that if we don't communicate well enough with them, it can create a great degree of disconnect and disenfranchisement. I've seen where communication has been really good and where it hasn't worked so well – and people's responses to both.

On a personal level, it has definitely made me think that there are certain aspects of these senior roles that I believe I could do really well. Conversely, there were other aspects where I wondered whether I could really step up! It was an interesting mix of a reinforcement of both capability and the fear factor (which I have cognitively reframed as 'challenge', which makes it less aversive and more motivating to engage with!)

The programme also helped move me forward in terms of the crossroads in my career dilemma. By observing senior leaders who managed to juggle both research and their leadership portfolios it showed me that it is possible. I was filled with awe to see some leaders do this with such panache, that it reaffirmed by belief that could be done and that there are ways in which this can be achieved, maybe not at the level of my research, but enough to still be in touch with the reality on the ground. I see this as so important as being linked out to the real world of delivering research/teaching is very helpful, especially when in a senior leadership position.

**Q.** Has engaging with this had any impact on your career, and if so, how?

**A.** I'm not sure it has had an impact on my career just yet – I'm still in the same job and I haven't applied for any other jobs. However, whilst it may not be directly related, the programme improved my resolve to get involved in the decision making of the university. I applied to be a member of the Research Steering Committee for the university and have been successful in being chosen to be part of this group. I also applied to be on Senate and am one of six professorial staff to be elected, so these are both positive experiences.

**Q.** Are there any specific elements of learning that you have found useful, and have you been able to apply these into your workplace/working practices?

**A.** I really enjoyed the 1:1 sessions with the VC and also the sessions where I was able to observe others. It gave me a sense of the structure of the leadership of the university. It also gave me the conviction of the type of leader I wanted to be, and the type of leadership style that felt comfortable to me. It has enabled me to be a better leader in the leadership roles that I currently have, including improving how I listen and also having the confidence to provide appropriate challenge in a way that is not personal but is required to move the university forward. I feel more conscious and confident in doing these well, with greater skill and finesse.

**Q.** What advice would you give to others who might be considering getting involved in a mentoring programme?

**A.** Apply! There is a lot of learning that can come out of this experience. People shouldn't dismiss the ability to make contacts at this senior level as well – most people don't have the opportunity to make these links with such senior levels of management.

**Q.** Are there any other insights or thoughts that you wish to share?

**A.** One of the unexpected things I gained from the programme was that I got to know the VC better, I have more insights into who she is as a person, and what's behind some of the decisions and choices being made. It has enabled me to give peers a different perspective about the rationale for decisions that are made, reframing colleagues' perceptions on occasions. Sometimes this is just to re-assure people that our views are not forgotten or overlooked. It has enabled a closer link between the VC and my colleagues, which also works both ways!

I think this is a tremendously bold, ambitious and innovative programme that needs to continue. It definitely signals a commitment by the university that it wants to develop the next generation of leaders and is genuinely interested in diversity by design. Specifically, it demonstrates the incredible generosity of our VC, who is exemplary as the main figurehead for this programme.

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