



UNIVERSITY  
*of*  
OTAGO  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Otāgo*  
NEW ZEALAND

Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington

*Results of 2017 Staff Mentoring Survey*

## Background

The Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington, has a Research Support Strategy that aims to '*encourage constructive discussion and actions around ways to support the overall health research performance*'. Several initiatives are currently underway to achieve this aim, with these initiatives led by the Research Support Strategy Committee.

One of the initiatives that have been identified by this Committee is around the issue of mentoring, particularly of junior and emerging staff. The Committee have identified that a process needs to be put in place which ensures that all staff have access to peer review of their grant applications, and that each staff member should have a designated leader/mentor who takes on this responsibility. The Committee identified that this is probably already happening at a Research Group level within our Department – but it is possible that some staff may 'fall through the cracks'.

The need for a leader/mentor who takes on the responsibility of reviewing grant applications for emerging staff has also brought to light the more general need for a 'stocktake' of the current state of mentorship in our Department. The extent to which our staff are engaged in a mentoring relationship is unclear, as are the areas in which there is currently unmet need.

As such, at the end of 2017 all staff members of the Department were invited to take part in a brief survey, with questions pertaining to their personal experience of mentoring. This brief report shows the results from that survey, briefly summarises them, and makes some recommendations based on these observations.

Any comments and suggestions should be sent to the Research Portfolio Leader, [jason.gurney@otago.ac.nz](mailto:jason.gurney@otago.ac.nz).

## Methods

Between 30<sup>th</sup> November and 15<sup>th</sup> December, 42 staff members of the Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington, completed a 10-item *Survey Monkey* survey. Eight of the items were multiple-choice, with two items allowing for free-text response. The median time taken to answer the survey was 2 minutes and 21 seconds.

Questions that were included on the survey were:

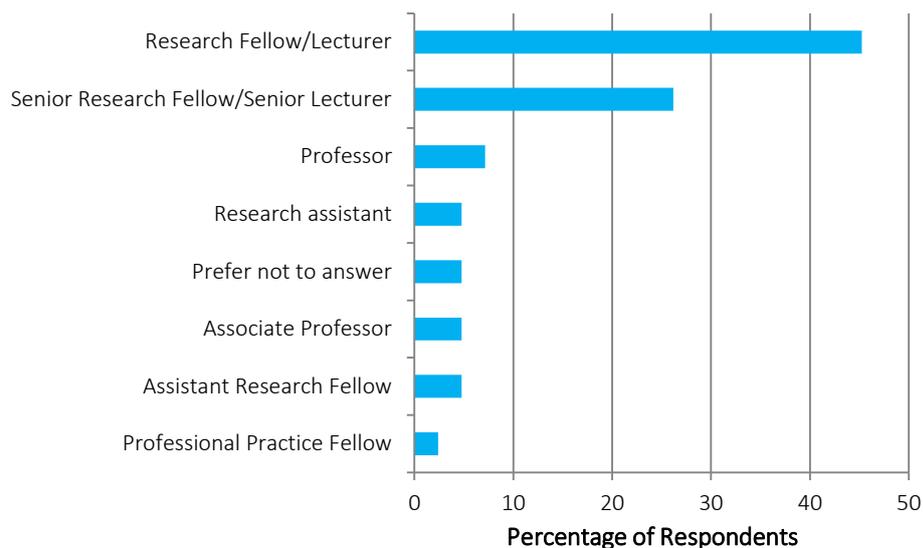
1. What is your position?
2. Do you feel you have a mentor?
3. If you don't have a mentor, would you like a mentor?
4. Is your mentor 'formal' or 'informal'?
5. Where is your mentor from?
6. Are you happy with the mentoring you receive?
7. What is the most useful thing your mentor does for you? (Free-text)
8. What is the least useful thing your mentor does? (Free-text)
9. How did you come to have a mentor?
10. What would you like from a mentor?

Raw data were downloaded from *Survey Monkey* and analysed in Microsoft Excel 2010 and SAS v9.3.

## Results

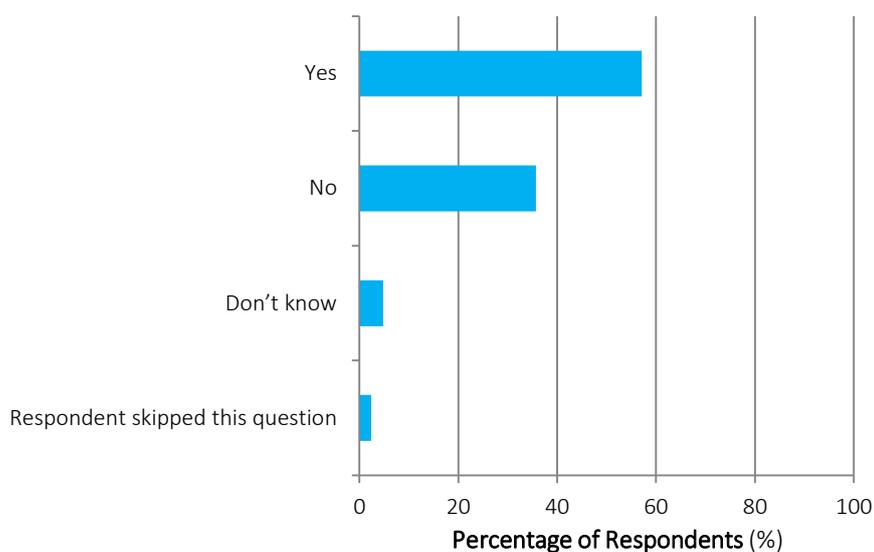
A total of 42 staff from the Department of Public Health completed the survey. Of these 42 respondents, 19 (45%) were Research Fellows or Lecturers, 11 (26%) were Senior Research Fellows or Senior Lecturers, 3 (7%) were Professors, 2 (4%) were Assistant Research Fellows and 2 (4%) were Associate Professors. A total of 2 (4%) preferred not to state their position, while the 3 (7%) respondents who selected 'Other' were a Research Assistant, Professional Practice Fellow and Research Administrator/Assistant respectively (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Respondents, by academic position



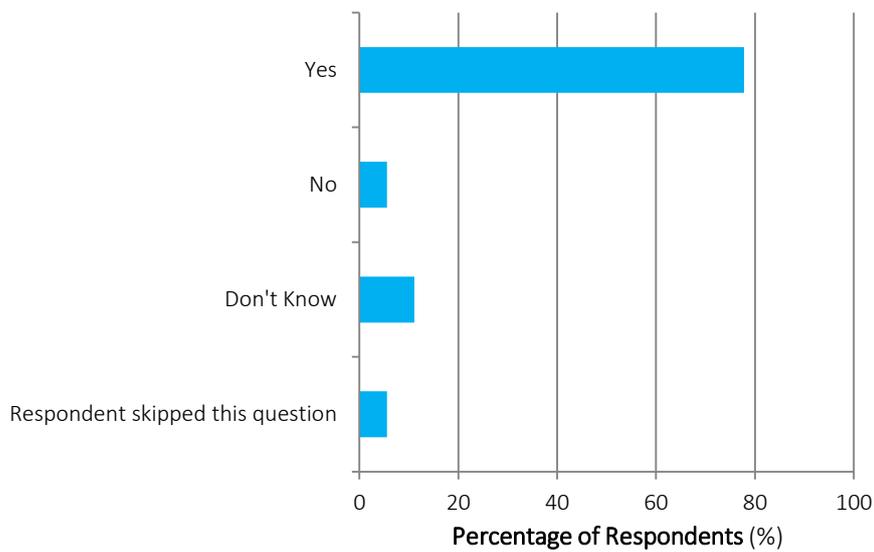
When asked whether they felt they had a mentor, 59% of those who responded said yes, 37% said no and 5% said they didn't know (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Proportion of respondents who say they have a mentor



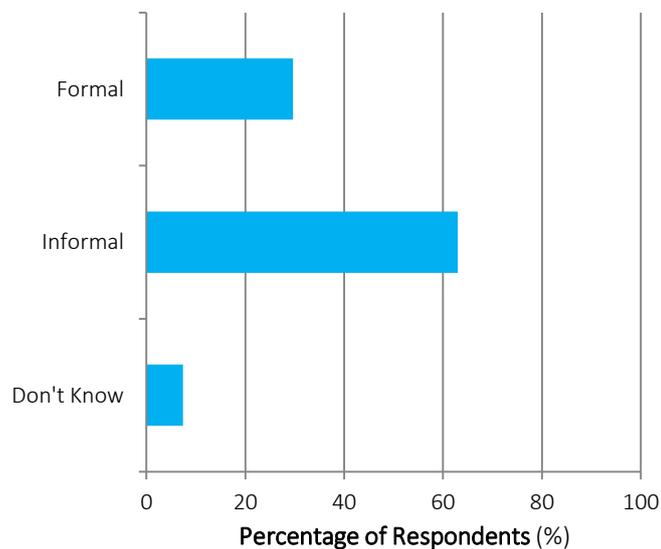
When those who did not have a mentor were asked whether they would like one, 78% said yes, 6% said no, 11% said they didn't know, and 6% preferred not to answer (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** *Proportion of those respondents without a current mentor that would like to have one*



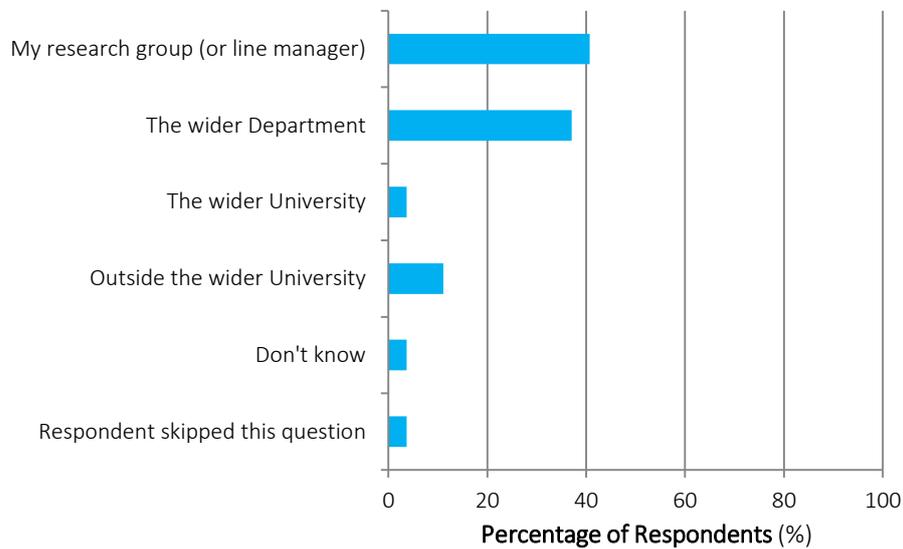
When those who had a current mentor were asked if their mentor was a 'formal' or 'informal' one, the majority (63%) of respondents said they were informal, with 30% stating that this relationship was formalised (Figure 4).

**Figure 4:** *Proportion of those with a current mentor that considered this relationship formal or informal*



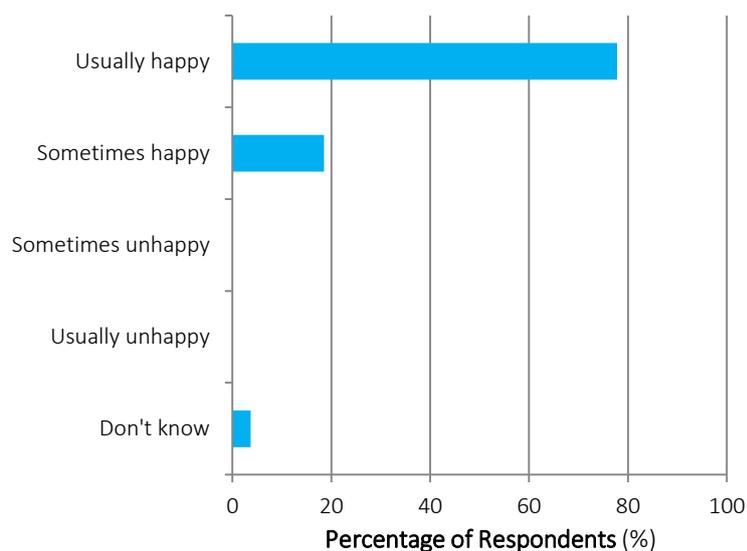
When those with a current mentor were asked where their mentor comes from, the most common answer from respondents was their research group or line manager (38%), followed by the wider Department (31%; Figure 5).

**Figure 5:** *Where mentors come from for those who say they have one*



When those with a current mentor were asked if they were happy with the mentoring they receive, the majority of respondents (78%) said they were usually happy, while 19% said they were sometimes happy. No respondent with a current mentor reported being unhappy (Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** *Reported happiness with current mentoring among those who say they have a mentor*



When those with a current mentor were asked what the **most** useful thing that their mentor did for them was, 4 general themes emerged: advice/experience, career development, general support and help staying on task. The quotes from respondents are presented below, organised beneath these themes (Table 1).

**Table 1:** *Quotes from respondents regarding the **most** useful things that their mentor does for them*

| Theme                       | Comment   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Advice/Experience</b>    | <p>"Knows the system, able to advise on how to get things done. Publishes a lot, is able to simplify ideas and help me to put effort into what is important."</p> <p>"Discusses current work-related issues, and offers sage and sensible advice."</p> <p>"An experienced ear to talk through plans and problems with."</p> <p>"They could answer questions that appear naive etc."</p> <p>"Informal help navigating the (wider version of) political aspects of meetings and networking - effectively passing on a wider version of institutional knowledge - ability to "read" a meeting etc."</p> <p>"Provide advice."</p> <p>"Gives feedback."</p> <p>"Acts as a sounding board."</p> <p>"Acts as a sounding board, offers practical advice."</p> <p>"Discussing research ideas and supporting grant applications."</p> |
| <b>Career Development</b>   | <p>"Opportunity to discuss wider career development issues."</p> <p>"Asks me about where I want to head in my career, and gives practical advice about how to get there, also helping me find openings/opportunities to gain experience in areas I'm interested in."</p> <p>"Career guidance."</p> <p>"Career direction advice."</p> <p>"Provide some relatively-objective advice on plans and approaches to career planning."</p>  |
| <b>General Support</b>      | <p>"Listens and keeps me employed."</p> <p>"Finds time for me."</p> <p>"Conversations."</p> <p>"Encouragement."</p> <p>"Notices my achievements, supportive, motivating."</p> <p>"Gives perspective."</p>   |
| <b>Help to Stay On Task</b> | <p>"Checks in with me every week."</p> <p>"Discussing research ideas and supporting grant applications."</p> <p>"Explains things and guides me through before she actually wants the work done, so I'm aware beforehand what's needed."</p> <p>"Reads my work and provides feedback when they have time."</p> <p>"Shared responsibility for decisions."</p> <p>"Gives me high-quality and prompt feedback on manuscripts and grant applications."</p>   |

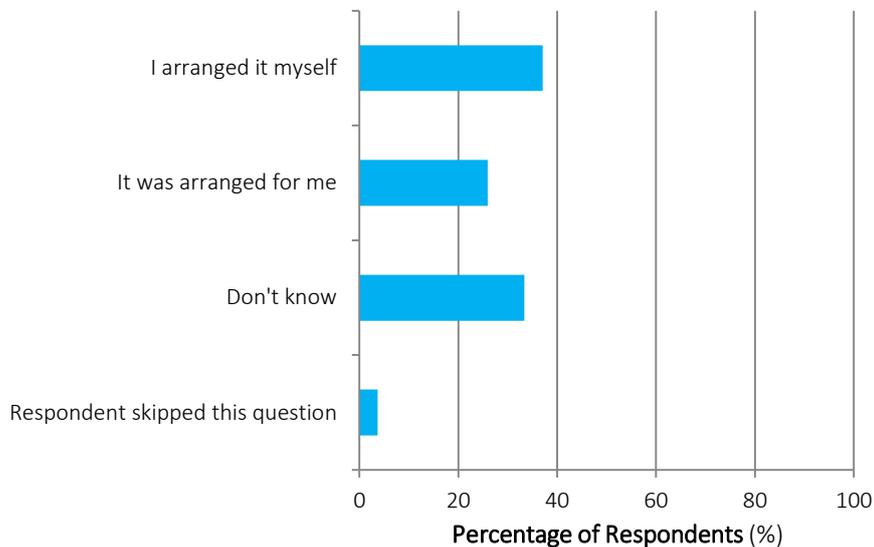
When those with a current mentor were asked what the **least** useful thing that their mentor did for them was, the main theme that emerged was timeliness – primarily in terms of availability of their mentor. The second theme was around differing expectations between the mentor and the staff member. The quotes from respondents are presented below, organised beneath these themes (Table 2).

**Table 2:** *Quotes from respondents regarding the **least** useful things that their mentor does for them*

| Theme  | Comment   |
|--|---|
| Timeliness   | "Not read work."  |
|  | "A lack of contact."  |
|  | "Lack of time and favours people with other interests."   |
|  | "Provide untimely advice."  |
|  | "Not respond to email promptly."  |
|  | "Hard to contact sometimes, no formal and regular meetings, I feel like a nuisance and it is really about me being better organised to develop grants early." |
|  | "They are busy so I do not get as much one-on-one time with them as I would like."  |
|  | "Gives me advice i am not ready to take (but this is probably still useful!)."  |
|  | "Be too busy."  |
|  | Differing Expectations  |
| "Expecting that my situation fits within a "standard" university academic pathway (which it doesn't)." |   |
| "I need a different mentor for other specialised advice which I can't get in our Department."          |   |
| "Reveal the cultural gulf between us."   |   |
| "Doesn't support me enough."   |   |

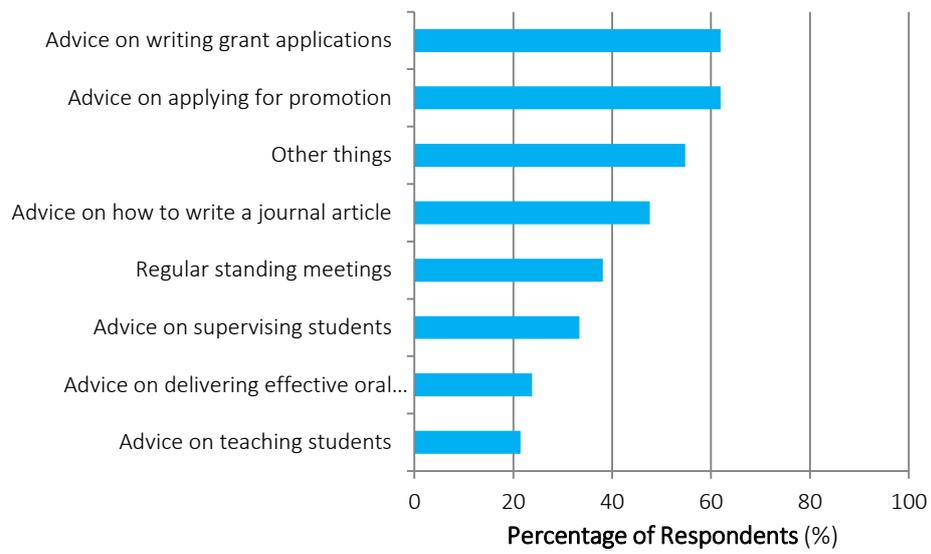
When those who had a current mentor were asked how they came to have a mentor, the most common response was that they arranged it themselves (37%), with a smaller proportion saying that they either didn't know (33%) or that the mentor was arranged for them (26%; Figure7).

**Figure 7:** *How respondents came to have their mentor*



When all respondents were asked what they would like from a mentor – and given the opportunity to supply multiple answers – nearly two thirds of respondents (62%) said they wanted advice on writing grant applications and applying for promotion. Nearly half (47%) said they wanted advice on how to write a journal article. More than a third (38%) said they wanted regular standing meetings, while a third (33%) said they wanted advice on supervising students. A quarter (24%) said they wanted advice on delivering effective oral presentations, while 21% said they wanted advice on teaching students (Figure 8). In addition, 23 respondents (55%) offered further suggestions for what they would like from a mentor beneath the 'Other' section of this question. For the sake of brevity, quotes from these respondents are presented in Appendix 1.

**Figure 8:** *What respondents (both those with or without a current mentor) want from a mentor (multiple responses were allowed)*



## Summary of Findings

The key points from these Results will now be briefly discussed. For the sake of brevity, these will be presented in bullet-point form.

- **There are some things that we are doing well.**
  - Nearly 60% of our respondents identified that they had a mentor – which means that the majority of our staff can identify a person that they feel they can speak to and get guidance on a range of career-related things.
  - Also, nearly all of those with a current mentor reported being happy with the mentoring they receive.
- **However, this survey also identified some substantial unmet need.**
  - While it is indeed positive that the majority of our staff said that they have a mentor, more than a third (37%) of our respondents said that they did not have one. This is not because these staff do not want to have a mentor, since the vast majority of these staff do indeed want one (78%).
  - Of those with a current mentor, most (63%) said that this relationship had not been formalised. Combined with this observation, a substantial proportion of those with a current mentor did not know how this mentor was attributed to them (33%), or had to seek-out this mentor themselves (37%). In combination, these observations may indicate a lack of clear planning in our Department in terms of mentor attribution.
- **Mentors are an invaluable source of experience and guidance.**
  - When reporting on those things that they found most useful from their mentor, staff reported looking to their mentor for a ‘bigger picture’ perspective on things – whether it be for their wider career, or for an individual study or problem.
- **However, the reoccurring challenge to a quality mentoring relationship is time.**
  - Staff reported that they did not have enough time with their mentor, with many sharing frustration about difficulties in getting hold of their mentor and/or receiving prompt and timely feedback. When asked what respondents would ideally like from their mentor, more than two-thirds of all respondents (38%) desired regular standing meetings with their mentor.
- **Respondents identified some key areas where they would like help from a mentor.** At the top of this list is assistance with the grant application process, as well as assistance with applying for promotion and advice on how to write a journal article.

## Recommendations

Based on the Results of this survey, the following recommendations are made with respect to further work in our Department regarding staff mentoring:

1. **That the Department ensures that every staff member who wants a mentor gets one.** In order to achieve this, an email to each staff member could be sent asking them if they do not have a mentor but would like to have one. Individual arrangements with each staff member could then be facilitated by the Research Portfolio Leader. This will involve discussions with staff member and one or more prospective mentors. When doing this, a balance will need to be struck between the experience and pedigree of the mentor on the one hand, and the time-poor nature of these mentors on the other.
2. **That the Department establishes some guidelines for effective mentoring.** This could be in the form of a simple, one-page document that offers guidance for successful mentorship in the Department.

## Appendix 1: 'Other' things that respondents want from a mentor

### Comment

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"Advice on where to submit papers - which could be seen as part of the process of writing papers."

"General career advice and work balance."

"General "touching base"; I acknowledge that other people than my mentor (who is my line supervisor) can and do offer mentoring. I am older and reasonably self-reliant but still appreciate a mentoring arrangement of some type."

"Advice on where to apply for grants (not just how to write them) and how to balance workload, and advice/assistance with moving to being an independent researcher."

"Advice on how to successfully approach performance reviews with salary and renewal of contracts in mind."

"What is regular standing meetings? Help to find other good mentors when they have limited expertise in the field/discipline you need assistance with."

"Culturally-congruent advice and support."

"General career guidance / planning ahead."

"Advice about key people to talk to (and sometimes introductions to those people). A person who can be a confidential sounding board for decisions. Advice about negotiating conflict or complex organisation politics. Sometimes it's just encouragement and moral support!"

"Advice on career trajectory."

"Being able to discuss really tricky issues as and when they arise (so we only have infrequent meetings; probably once per year)."

"In my previous University asking questions was difficult. I had a mentor whose own practice verged on unethical and whose main aim was to do the minimum of work. This mentor was assigned to me - I doubt that this is a viable approach to mentoring. Mentor relationships ideally should emerge. My feeling is that a Dept atmosphere which encourages people at every level to feel that they can ask questions and a range of opportunities from social events (e.g. for other purposes) at which questions can be casually put, to one-to-one meetings should be available. Distress should be acceptable, in other words, our work challenges matter to us all and people need to feel they get comfort."

"Advice on networking and navigating relationships."

"Given the importance of publications to progression and PBRF the Department/University should hold regular journal writing sessions - particularly for new/emerging staff. People may need more than one type of mentor depending on their role and the expertise of the mentor. I seek advice from several people as my role is varied."

"Career development advice"

"Support with media, tactics for public health action."

"As noted above, having a manager who is thinking about your future career development (as well as supporting you to do your best in your current role) is a rare and beautiful thing, and I feel very lucky to have that situation at present."

"This is really an extended note on mentoring more generally. Thinking about mentoring (and the list above), mentoring tasks can be split into "pastoral" type mentoring (which might include career advice or solving interpersonal conflicts) and more task-specific advice. Most of the items above are task-specific advice ("how do I get this thing done that I already know needs to be done?") but many of the key potential benefits of mentoring are in the more strategic areas (i.e. not just promotion/writing applications/writing papers, but how to go about prioritising all of these elements for one's own career) The following comments are on the split between who might provide mentoring, which needs to consider the power dynamic between mentor and mentee: this is one of the reasons why mentoring plans quite often suggest that a mentor NOT be a line manager, as the priorities of the mentor and mentee might not be aligned (one would hope they would be, but this differs across senior staff of course.) IMO these two types of mentoring really benefit from different people: the task-specific mentoring items (writing articles, grant applications, teaching/supervising, presenting) can very well be done by a line-manager/research group leader (and should probably be done by these people) and typically do happen to a greater or lesser extent in such relationships. But the more strategic elements of career progression -- which aren't really captured in the above list -- aren't necessarily do-able by a line-manager (or sometimes even an in-house mentor) because they involve complex questions involving power dynamics like "should I keep doing this work or do something else?" or "how can I get my project lead to give me a better authorship position on this paper that I've done 90% of the work?" (doesn't happen too often in Pub Health). These kinds of questions might not be possible or comfortable to ask of a line manager (and more junior people might feel that even asking such a question would be prejudicial to their employment relationship). This is all highly variable across senior staff of course -- I can think of many who would be able to do this well and fairly, and other senior staff who might not do this so well. I also think these points apply more to more junior staff rather than the just-turned-senior staff."

"Need help with quantitative and kaupapa Māori epi. I know my field but need to develop capacity in large quant studies with international indigenous audiences. I am assumed to be a senior researcher in the department but am currently on a lecturer/researcher pay rate and am in my 8th year here. I need practical help for promotion application."

"Advice on finding opportunities for collaboration."

"Advice on external engagements."

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- End of Report -