

Circle Practice and Powerful Questions

A community-led peer mentoring model for research professionals

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Peer-mentoring circles as a mechanism for intentional development

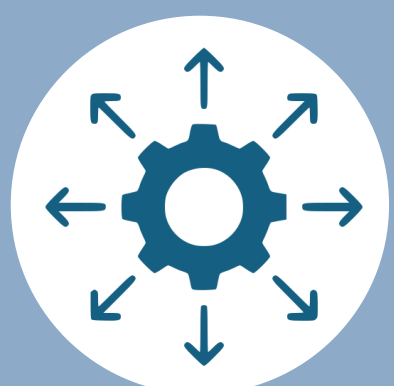
Many HEI staff supporting research culture are operating in the ‘third space’ between academic and professional domains,¹ often having to reach beyond their institutions to find colleagues with similar remits. As researcher developers we found the increasing complexity and significance of our work tends to be hidden beneath the surface,² while the ambiguity of our status within our institutions means opportunities for professional development and progression are hard to identify and navigate.³

The Vitae Peer Mentoring Circles (VPMC) scheme is designed to harness the diversity of roles, institutions, career paths and lived experience that researcher developers bring to the table. Based on our collective experience in facilitation, coaching, and social learning approaches, we incorporated circle practice, action learning, and Nancy Kline’s Thinking Environment; creating an opportunity for researcher developers to come together in groups of 4-6 people, establishing peer support to explore challenges and creating meaningful professional networks across institutions.

Our top 5 tips:



Find a sponsor. Vitae’s insights and support with administration and communication are integral to the success of the scheme.



Agree the scope of your scheme. Focusing on a clear area of practice helps ensure the action learning sets are useful for all participants



Recruit a diverse, action-oriented steering group. Think about representing different types and sizes of research institutions, geographical spread, and career backgrounds, as well as protected characteristics. Ensure SG members understand the role is about doing, not discussing!



Manual matching is worth the effort, ensuring diverse and balanced circles. We also asked participants what they hoped to gain from the scheme during registration and matched them accordingly as far as possible.



Build support for self-facilitation into your scheme. Self-led peer mentoring circles made the VPMC scheme sustainable. It also built an extra layer of development into the experience, as participants became confident in facilitating action learning.

How the scheme worked:

- Community-led steering group
- Sponsor-led admin and comms
- Participant toolkit
- Manual matching process
- Plenary sessions to open and close the circles

62 Researcher developers

11 Circles

39 Meetings

91%

of survey respondents said they would recommend the experience to colleagues. (n=33)

Participants valued:

- Protected time to explore, reflect, and set intentions
- Identifying personal strengths and development areas
- Learning from each other
- Collaborative problem solving

Some logistical challenges emerged too, along with differing views on how much structure circles should have. The following year we made a stronger recommendation to use action learning and demonstrated an action learning set in the introductory opening session.

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Sign up for this year’s
Peer Mentoring
Circles

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Find out more
about the VPMC
scheme

The VPMC Steering group: Dr Heather Mackenzie & Rosie Wadman, University of Southampton; Dr Vani Naik, Edinburgh Napier University; Alison Monkhouse, University of Huddersfield; Lisa Thompson, Ulster University; Dr Hanan Farah, University of Birmingham; Dr Susan Black, University of Oxford; Dr Loice Natukunda, University of Lincoln; Hannah Still and Emma Day, Vitae.

References: Whitchurch, C. (2008), **Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of Third Space Professionals in UK Higher Education**. Higher Education Quarterly, 62: 377-396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00387.x>; MacKenzie, H., Wadman, R., Howe, C., Thompson, L., & Compton-Daw, E. (2021) **Valuing the Impact of Researcher Developers: What is it that we do?** Available at: <https://vitae.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Valuing-the-impact-of-Researcher-Developers-Iceberg-infographic.pdf> (Accessed 24/10/2025). ; Freeman, R.P.J. and Price, A.M. (2024) **‘Researcher developers: an emerging third space profession’**. London Review of Education, 22 (1), 25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.22.1.25>.