# Report: Mentoring Cohort 2020

Josephine Dryden and Andy Nobes, 2021

**Please note, all quotes within this report which are not attributed are from the anonymous final survey.**

*"In all, I can totally say this mentorship programme is worthwhile. My mentor and I would maintain the great relationship that we have even after this mentorship programme is over."*

*Female mentee, Ghana*

*"Great to make a new colleague and I do hope we will be able to keep in touch for future mentoring opportunities… I am interested in becoming a better mentor and really grateful for AuthorAid for the experience."*

*Male mentor from the USA*

The AuthorAID online mentoring platform has been active since 2014. During this time over 1,000 mentoring relationships have been established between researchers from all over the world, with over 500 'tasks' reported as completed, including papers published, grants and scholarship applications submitted, and some into longer-term mentoring relationships and collaborations.

However, virtual mentoring can also be challenging, with many mentors and mentees reporting difficulties with communication, cultural differences, non-responsiveness, and differences in aims and expectations of what academic mentoring means.

With this in mind, the 2020 mentoring cohort was developed in partnership with the AuthorAID Steward group. This small pilot aimed to improve our understanding of virtual mentoring, identifying the characteristics or 'ingredients' of a successful mentoring relationship, and also exploring the success and feasibility of manually matching mentors and mentees.

The pilot was run by members of the AuthorAID team (Andy Nobes, Josie Dryden, and Sioux Cumming), and AuthorAID Stewards (Haseeb Md Irfanullah, Funmilayo Doherty, Bernard Appiah, Alex Arreola, Richard de Grijs, Dilshani Dissanayake, Zainab Kaltungo, Buna Bhandari, and Aurelia Munene).

**The Selection Process:**
Following an open call on the AuthorAID website, over 450 people applied to participate. After an initial screening process was conducted to remove incomplete and ineligible applications, the team assigned each application a score using a rubric (appendix 1). An additional (unplanned) step was added after the initial review to ensure that mentors had not published in poor quality and predatory journals.

Ten matches were then identified among the high scoring applications, accounting for both discipline and type of support (methodology, publication, grant/PhD applications, etc.). Finding good matches was challenging due to the broad disciplinary spread and the types of support needed and offered. As such, it was necessary to select applications that received a slightly lower rubric score to find appropriate matches. Further, even in cases where it was possible to find a close disciplinary match, aligning the desired and offered skills was not always possible. It appeared that support with statistics especially was in low supply and high demand.

Of the seven pairs who completed the programme, six reported being satisfied with their match. Research discipline was rated the most important factor to consider when matching a mentoring pair. Geography (with the implication being contextual knowledge, but also time difference) was the next most cited, closely followed by gender. One participant commented thus:

*"[it] Depends on the goals of the mentee, if they are interested in specific help on their research maybe the discipline will be the most important, if they are struggling as a female scientist for sure gender"*

Indeed, several participants noted the value of having a mentee of the same gender. For example, one mentor began the programme only a few months after having a baby. She reflected the following about her match: *"…being a woman, she could understand my emotional state at the initiation of our mentorship agreement – which was just a few months postpartum. I derived a lot of encouragement from her experience as a momademic"* Female mentee, Nigeria. Further quotes and more information on this can be found in the Mid-Point Review.

**The Selected Pairs:**
The ten selected mentoring pairs represented 13 countries: Cameroon, Egypt, Japan, Poland, Nigeria, United States, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, Nepal, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. Exact gender parity was almost achieved for both the mentors and mentees; with 5/10 mentors being women and 6/10 mentees.

Before introducing the mentoring pairs, individual participants were sent emails congratulating them on being selected for the programme and also providing anonymised information about who they were paired with. This provided an opportunity for all participants to confirm the suitability of their match.

**Format of the Programme:**
First, all participants were asked to sign a mentoring agreement, which described the parameters of the programme (appendix 2). Next, each mentoring pair was required to develop a learning agreement collaboratively, specifying milestone objectives (after two, four and the full six months), and the frequency of their communication. These learning agreements were reviewed by the AuthorAID, and Steward's team and pairs were offered feedback. In most cases, comments encouraged pairs to be more specific in their objectives (or SMARTTT), and also encouraging mentees (especially PhD students) to ensure they had the support of their supervisors.

The pairs were supported by the AuthorAID team through the provision of resources, the offer of ad-hoc support via email, an orientation meeting, and a mid-way reflection session.

In the end of pilot survey, which was conducted in May 2021, all mentors and 57% of mentees agreed that setting clear and achievable milestones was a useful exercise that helped to establish and guide their relationship. Further, one mentor felt it was also important to ensure clear, achievable objectives: *"It is great to set goals and objectives. But I found my mentee always made these goals rather vague. Achieving a greater degree of specificity in my role as a mentor would be great."*

Indeed, another mentor suggested that all pairs could consider *"having specific thematic focus for the relationship so that it can be maximized." Male mentor from the USA.*

| Programme timeline: | |
|---|---|
| Open call for applications | 9 - 21 August 2020 |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Review of applications* | *21 – 27 August 2020* |
| *Successful applicants notified and given the opportunity to anonymously reject their match* | *28 August 2020* |
| *Mentoring pairs introduced* | *1 September 2020* |
| *Orientation Session* | *11 September 2020* |
| *Submission of mentoring & learning agreements* | *30 September 2020* |
| *Milestone 1* | *31 October 2020* |
| *Check-in Meeting* | *13 November 2021* |
| *Mid-Point Review* | *1 December 2021* |
| *Milestone 2* | *1 January 2021* |
| *Milestone 3* | *31 March 2021* |
| *Official end date* | *1 April 2021* |
| *Survey and final report* | *13 May 2021* |

**First milestone check in session**

After the first milestone, we invited all participants to an informal session to reflect on the journey so far. The agenda included a presentation from one of the Stewards (on Improving Publications Through Writing Clubs), and breakout sessions – this included breaking into two rooms for the mentors and mentees to their experiences and tips so far. Full notes from the session can be found below as Appendix 3), and a summary of the findings are as follows:

- Initial plans for structured interactions (as described in the learning agreements) did not always work out, however, all pairs are still in regular communication.

- The pandemic added pressure to everyday life and made some types of research challenging. However, despite challenges, there were numerous examples of positive adaptations and interactions.

- The process of setting (and adapting) goals was a useful and contemplative process. Pairs needed to realistically assess what was possible within 6-months and also balance expectations.

- Several pairs are exploring the overall realities of being an academic. This includes challenges associated with childcare provision, family life and ensuring mental wellbeing.

**Mid-Point Review:**

In December 2020, the mentoring pairs participated in an informal mid-point review and provided an update on their progress. At this point, 8 of the pairs were still actively working together and were on track to complete all of their milestone objectives. Several exciting updates were also shared, including the news that one mentee had co-authored two successful grant proposals for an institutional research fund, with the help of their mentor.

*Quick Summary of Mid-Point Review Feedback:*

- Several pairs reported that there was a period of trial and error before settling on a mode and frequency of communication. Many relied on the immediacy of WhatsApp, in combination with email and conference calls.

- By far the most common challenge faced by pairs was time management and balancing the mentoring programme with other priorities at work and home (included in 8/12 responses).  Some pairs have also negotiated disruptions to internet and power supply (included in 4/12 responses).

- Unfortunately, two of the mentoring pairs were no longer in contact at the mid-way point. In both cases, the mentor informed AuthorAID (after receiving the survey) that their mentee was not responding. After following up with the mentees, we received one response clarifying personal circumstances and the pace of the programme were responsible.

    *The full report is available in Appendix 2.*

**Final Review:**

After the full programme, we asked participants to complete an anonymous survey and also compose a brief final report (submitted individually, but in conversation with their mentor or mentee). Overall, 57% of respondents to the survey had achieved all of their milestone objectives, and others reported being in the process of finishing up. It is worth noting that several pairs were unable to achieve or needed to amend certain objectives due to external factors, as explored further below. For example, due to delays in university approval processes and PhD timelines. Overall, 86%

of mentees who responded to the survey agreed that the programme had equipped them with additional skills and understanding.

Unfortunately, a further mentoring pair lost contact during the latter stages of the programme. The mentee informed AuthorAID that they could not reach their mentor, and there was no response to AuthorAID's inquiries to the mentor either. Overall, this means that 7 pairs completed the programme.

*Responses to the anonymous survey can be accessed via the following link - www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-7GTBMV8V9/ and are detailed in the tables and sections below.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **How helpful mentees found the programme** <br> *(scale of 1 to 5)* | ***3.5*** |
| **How rewarding mentors found the programme** <br> *(scale of 1 to 5)* | *3.9* |
| **Reported quality of matches** <br> *(from very good to bad)* | *Good to very good: 90%* <br> *Neither good nor bad: 9%* |
| **Support and guidance from the AuthorAID team** <br> *(from extremely helpful to not at all helpful)* | *Extremely to very helpful: 81%* <br> *Somewhat helpful: 18%* |

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Induction to this pilot programme (i.e., the welcome emails, orientation session) was informative and appropriate. | Mentees: 72% Mentors: 67% | Mentees: 29% Mentors: 33% | | | |
| Setting clear and achievable milestones was a useful exercise. | Mentees: 14% Mentors: 83% | Mentees: 43% Mentors: 17% | Mentees: 43% Mentors: 0% | | |
| I achieved my milestone objectives. | Mentees: 14% | Mentees: 43% | Mentees: 14% | Mentees: 29% | |
| I enjoyed the opportunity to meet with other mentoring pairs on the programme (i.e., the informal check-in meetings). | Mentees: 29% Mentors: 50% | Mentees: 43% Mentors: 17% | Mentees: 29% Mentors: 17% | Mentees: 0% Mentors: 17% | |
| I would have liked additional opportunities to meet with other mentors/mentees on the programme. | Mentees: 29% Mentors: 50% | Mentees: 57% Mentors: 33% | Mentees: 14% Mentors: 17% | | |
| Following the mentoring programme, my skills and understanding have increased in the areas I was looking to improve. | Mentees: 43% | Mentees: 43% | Mentees: 14% | | |
| The programme was suited to my needs. | Mentees: 29% | Mentees: 57% | Mentees: 14% | | |

**Challenges:**

When asked to reflect on challenges, scheduling difficulties due to competing priorities and time differences were most commonly cited. For example, one pair was mediating a ten-hour time difference, between East Africa and North America. As reported in the Mid-Point Review, several pairs also continued to negotiate disruptions to both power and connectivity.

Another set of factors that affected progress were external or institutional. For example, the speed of bureaucratic systems, and the potential for misalignment between the mentoring programme and the mentees research timeline or PhD. In the future, it would be beneficial for AuthorAID to advise mentoring pairs to consider their objectives in alignment with these structures, and also identify key opportunities for external mentoring within a PhD or research project timeline.

*"…my mentee wasn't able to publish the literature review I guided her to write on her Ph.D. because of time. If this program came up earlier in her program, she may have been able to do so…which is very crucial in Ph.D. training in helping the candidate understand the study area well as well as gain skills in writing and publishing."*

**Feedback on the Pilot Structure and Delivery:**
On a sliding scale of 1-5, there was an average score of 3.5 out of 5 for how useful mentees found the programme, and 3.9 out of 5 for how rewarding mentors found the programme.

*"I was able to improve my communication and leadership skills. Furthermore, it increased my confidence and motive to engage in a volunteering opportunity"*

*Female mentor, Egypt.*

All participants stated that the programme met their expectations, and 86% reported that the programme suited their needs.

The guidance and support from the AuthorAID team was seen as helpful by all respondents. However, there are opportunities for increasing the level and quality of support offered, as indicated in the next section.

**Lessons Learned:**

- In future cohorts, the team has reflected that we could consider opening the 'call' only to certain thematic areas or first identifying mentees and then opening a 'call' for mentors in corresponding fields.

- It would be beneficial to add a check to the initial screening process for mentors (or in the rubric) to ensure that they have not published in poor quality or disreputable journals (NB: this was not an issue that was identified for the mentors who were selected for the programme)

- One survey respondent suggested that seeking further confirmation about the quality of a match before introducing a mentoring pair would be valuable: *"There is no particular factor that is most important, I think it is very individual and so many factors should be taken into consideration. The opinion of the mentee should be sought before such matches are made."*

- 86% of respondents to the final survey would have liked additional opportunities to meet other mentoring pairs on the programme. It is suggested that this could take the form of an *"interaction session before commencing the programme"* or *"a live meeting at each milestone, to keep momentum."*

- Equipping mentors and mentees with general advice or resources on how to make the most of their mentoring partnership was also requested: *"It would be nice to have a training session on how to benefit from mentorship for the mentees, and one on how to mentor for the mentors."*

- The length of the programme, and when it is scheduled within the year, is also important to consider. Several pairs anecdotally reported that there was a loss of momentum at the end of the calendar year, as a result of the festive period and examinations at universities. Further, one survey respondent suggested that *"…it might be worthwhile to consider a*

*short[er] duration of mentorship as well. At the onset, the experience was amazing but towards the end, communication with my mentor was less frequent and at some point, I felt like I had learnt what was most important and what was left was the application of the concepts which I had learnt…Such shorter duration mentorship agreements would also give me the opportunity to work with several renowned scientists within a frame of time and learn so much more. In a nutshell, I would keep the mentorship relationship short and sweet."*

**Reflections from the participants on their performance:**

Participants were also asked to reflect on what they would do differently if they did the programme again.

- *"I would be more focused in communicating my needs to my mentor. That is to say working on one thing for a short duration and moving on to another thing afterwards, as against working on multiple things at the same time. I find that once I understand the key principles, what is left is the application on my part."*

- *"Have more live meetings and plan them in the beginning for example every 3 weeks or each last Friday of the month at a specific hour that it would be a habit and not something that needs extensive planning each time."*

- *The importance of transparency and trust ("We were able to share intimately our experiences and exchange projects without any fear.") and adaptability ("Contextualising with the reality on the ground by adapting to changes in schedule without any hurt.")*

*Male mentor, Cameroon*

## Appendix 1: Key Learning from Programme - Selection criteria/rubric.

**Mentor**

1. **Area of study and research focus**
2. **Their expectations of a mentee?**
   5-point scale: 1 – unrealistic to 5 – realistic
3. **Motivation?**
   5-point scale: 1 – vague, 3 – indicated, though not defined, 5 – well defined
4. **Skills provided**
   5-point scale: 1 – unconvincing to 5 – comprehensive
   Link to the multiple-choice question.
   - Using appropriate research methods
   - Performing data analysis
   - Statistics
   - Manuscript writing and publication
   - Choosing appropriate journals
   - Presentation skills
   - Grant proposal writing
   - PhD proposal Writing
   - Career guidance
   - Other
5. **Experience?**
   **5-point scale:** 1 – too inexperienced to 5 – well experienced

**Total of 20 points**

**\*\*\***

**Mentee**

1. **Clear goals and objectives?**
   **5-point scale:** 1 – unclear to 5 – very clear
2. **realistic goals and objectives**
   5-point scale: 1 – unrealistic to 5 – realistic short- and long-term ambitions
3. **What they look for in a mentor**
   5-point scale: 1 – unrealistic to 5 – realistic

**Total of 15 points**

**Matching**
**This would leave mentors and mentees with a score out of 20 and 15. From here we could review all applications which achieve a certain score, taking into consideration the following:**

1. Skills needed/provided
2. Disciplinary focus
3. Ambitions for a mentor/mentee relationship?

## Appendix 2: Mid-Point Review

After three months, participants in the 2020 Mentoring Cohort were asked to complete a brief mid-point review (five questions). Overall, twelve of the twenty participants provided written responses.

The first two questions asked participants to report on their progress so far. Five of the ten pairs have completed their milestone one (Sept – Nov) objectives, and a further three pairs have made significant progress but have some outstanding tasks. All eight of these pairs also report strong progress on their milestone two (Dec-Jan) objectives, despite the festive period causing some delay.

Within these questions, there were also several exciting updates, including:

- One mentee co-authored two successful proposals for an Institutional Research Fund

- One mentee has been invited to interview for a fellowship position

- One pair held a virtual meeting with researchers/students on the experience of being a woman in academia

Unfortunately, two of the mentoring pairs are no longer in contact. In both cases, the mentor informed AuthorAID (after receiving the survey) that their mentee was not responding. After following up with the mentees, we received one response clarifying that personal circumstances and the pace of the programme were responsible.

The third question asked mentors and mentees to reflect on what has worked well so far. Several pairs noted that completing the Learning Agreement was a valuable opportunity to establish and guide their relationship.

*"…having a realistic plan has helped me to be easier on myself and focus on daily progress, which would ultimately lead to the achievement of my set goals over time."* (mentee)

*"The initial statements of objectives and milestones summarised in the learning agreement have been extremely useful in guiding our interactions and maintaining focus."* (mentor)

Aligning with feedback in the November check-in meeting, pairs report that there was a period of trial and error before settling on a mode and frequency of communication. Many now rely on the immediacy of WhatsApp, in combination with email and conference calls.

*"…constant communication with my mentor helped keep me accountable and consistent in striving towards my goal."* (mentee)

*"Tools of communication such as email and WhatsApp has made it easy to get in touch almost instantly."* (mentor)

The fourth question asked pairs to reflect on any challenges affecting their ability to work together. By far the most common challenge (included in 8/12 responses) was time management and balancing the mentoring programme with other priorities at work and at home.

*"Research requires dedication of time in order to achieve the desired outputs. During the past three months, I have taken up more responsibilities related to work and these have reduced the time available for the mentorship activities. As a result, I have not kept pace with my plans and there*

*is still a lot left to be done."* (mentee)

*"Time and mutual availability for meetings has been a challenge. Several times my schedule conflicts with that of the mentee and we had to skip our bi-monthly meetings in such instances. This is not good for the overall outcome of the mentoring relationship."* (mentor)

Some pairs also have had to negotiate disruptions to internet and power supply (included in 4/12 responses).

*"Poor internet connection and power failure often disrupts online meetings. Therefore, we have not been able to strictly respect the schedule of weekly meetings. We, however, manage to catch-up whenever conditions are favourable."* (mentor)

Specific to the mentoring role, one respondent offered the following reflections:

a. **"Managing expectations is important**. The mentee initially alarmed me by overstating the degree to which she thought I would be impactful. Rushing ahead to the idea of longer-term mentoring and publishing together."

b. **"Orientation**. It took time to actually get a tangible sense of what help I could provide the mentee. To navigate away from grand ideas about general mentoring to specifics. This is still a challenge. I would like the mentee to lead more."

c. **"Integration with pre-existing mentors**. The mentee already has a PhD advisor and perhaps full committee. Some of the advice I gave (about project feasibility) may go against the advice of those mentors – who are presumably more informed about local expectations etc."

Relating to this final point, it was suggested that AuthorAID could play a role in mediating the relationship between supervisors and AuthorAID mentors, potentially "…building mentorship pathways via AuthorAid that integrate with existing local institutions." It is also worth noting that in AuthorAID's feedback to several Learning Agreements, we suggested that mentees check-in with their supervisors, and ensure they are comfortable with the programme.

The fifth question in the survey asked participants to reflect on the quality of their mentoring match, and to provide suggestions for what should be considered when AuthorAID makes future matches. Beyond looking for a close disciplinary match, the importance of taking country context and gender into consideration appears key:

*"It was really helpful that my mentor is from my home country (Nigeria) so she would completely relate to the unique challenges of carrying out research in a resource-limited environment as well as the demands and expectations of holding faculty positions. Also, being a woman, she could understand my emotional state at the initiation of our mentorship agreement – which was just a few months postpartum. I derived a lot of encouragement from her experience as a momademia"* (mentee)

*"I would have been more excited to partner with a Tanzanian researcher, as this is context, I have more familiarity with. However, Uganda is close enough and the topic is relevant to me."* (mentor)

*"I would have been more comfortable with a female mentor. This is because I found it difficult talking to my mentor about some personal issues that had prevented me from meeting up the first milestone on 30th November 2020."* (mentee)

That said, two responses argued the contrary; that one could learn more from a mentor in a different context.

*"If possible, mentor from advanced countries to the mentee of under-developed countries (in our context, we have not well -developed research conducting culture. We have lots of social and organizational issues where need to do research to solve those problems. But they are contextual and unsolved yet either unsolved from roughly conducted research or lack of research)."* (mentee)

*"both mentor and mentee [should be] from different context (to learn from different context)."* (mentee)

One mentor also encouraged AuthorAID to reflect on expectations around language editing:

*"I also English language proofread her PhD proposal, making numerous corrections. This was very helpful for the mentee I think – but is the kind of activity an English-speaking student could do, rather than a faculty member. I often get requests for **English language proofreading via AuthorAid online** – I think some of my students would willingly offer their services here – perhaps AuthorAid could open up some avenues for student-student mentorship?*

## Appendix 3: First Milestone Session:

**Key points from breakout (Mentees group)**

**GOALS**

- The process was a useful and reflective practice. Final goals balanced mentees own expectations, their supervisor's, and suggestions from the mentor.

*(In one case a mentee went from goals directed only at meeting promotion criteria to something more explorative and 'exciting' – with their mentor introducing new methods/ideas).*

- Multiple mentees were grateful for the general advice mentors could provide, i.e., being a woman in academia and negotiating associated challenges.

**CHALLENGES**

- One mentee reported their intention to move to Zoom meetings, rather than communicating exclusively via email, to deepen and develop conversations.

- Balancing expectations: linking to point above, it is necessary to balance one's own expectations with that of their supervisor and mentor. As Bernard emphasised, you can considerately choose not to follow advice.

- Balancing competing priorities, i.e., new motherhood.

- Mental wellness! Something multiple mentees are considering with their mentors.

**LESSONS**

- Explored time management with mentor – realised that it is better to spend 30 minutes writing a day than waiting until you have a whole uninterrupted afternoon (which is rare with a new baby!).

- Ensuring goals are realistic and not overambitious (amended milestone objectives following AA feedback).

**Key points from breakout (Mentor group)**

- Some mentors have seen an improvement in confidence, but sometimes this needs some gentle encouragement for the mentee to act first.

- In some cases, we have needed to 'downscale' the goals of the mentoring relationship and be more realistic about what is achievable in 6 months.

- Some have struggled to stick to regular catchups, despite initial enthusiasm – but as long as we stay in contact it's okay.

- We are aware of certain challenges with the pandemic – adding pressures to everyday life and making certain types of research difficult

- Some mentors have learnt new skills from getting involved with mentee's activities! One mentor had ended up giving a presentation to her mentee's institution on the challenges of being a successful women researcher.

- The importance of patience in intercultural relationships.

- It has been good to see positive interaction and adaptation to circumstances. Some things are challenging to overcome in a short time, but progress has been good so far.

- We have heard several stories of challenges related to childcare and family life as a researcher – please do tell your mentor (or the AuthorAID team) if there is any additional advice or support that we can give.

## Appendix 4: Steward responses to this report (via email to Josie Dryden)

**Richard**: Thanks for the report. It reads well (one thing I was wondering about was the number of very highly ranked mentees that didn't get selected in the matching exercise) and offers quite a lot of food for thought. A quick first impression suggests that perhaps next time we could start with a call for mentees only, select the top-X (where X could be 10 or more) and then issue a call for mentor based on anonymised summaries of the selected mentees' needs.

**Seyi**: I was wondering if mentors had anything to do with matching. From the report, i could tell mentees did not have anything to do with the matching. If answer to my first question is no, is it possible mentors get to choose mentees in the next round at least?

**Aurelia**: One of the areas I have picked from the report is preparation. I think an orientation session for mentees and mentors separately is important. For the mentees, sessions on goal setting, staying motivated, communicating your needs, self-directed learning etc. could be useful. I also see the

length of the mentorship needs to remain flexible and the mentor and mentee can agree on what works best for them. I have seen from our program, when the mentee has an opportunity to approve of the mentor prior, they own the process a little better. I agree with Richard's suggestion, start with a mentee, find out their needs, then invite mentors who can address these needs to apply. We also use this approach in our program.