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The politics of mentoring

In the dialogue below, Assistant Professor [Alexander McClelland](#) and PhD student [Lizzie Hughes](#) discuss their experience participating in the [Surveillance Studies Network mentorship programme](#). Anyone interested in participating in the programme as mentor/mentee should email Mentorship Coordinator Oliver Kayas (o.g.kayas@ljmu.ac.uk) to find out more.



Image by [Claudio Schwarz](#) on Unsplash.

What is the importance of mentoring in academia for each of you?

Alex: Built into academia is the idea of training and mentorship, these are supposed to be foundational elements of the system. But a lot is missed by the system, as it was not built by us, and is meant to deliberately exclude many of us. So I see mentorship, done *by and for* those of us on the margins as essential for survival in the system. It can be a political act. The sharing of skills and practical strategies, supporting each other in helping navigate the system, can be a step to undoing the pervasive individualism and competition in academia. Academia is rife with elitism, which insidiously drives marginalization, and is intended to create dividing lines of exclusion. [As a queer HIV activist](#), I feel an imperative to share what I have learned about navigating academia with other

emerging queer scholars and activists. This is a small step in undoing the elitism. And supporting others, who in the end will hopefully surpass you, and who will go forth to mentor others.

Lizzie: Alex and I have had some enriching discussions about our shared beliefs in the political nature of mentoring, which necessarily included addressing the murky and elitist politics of academia. Like many other PhD students (and maybe a lot of academics, established or otherwise!), I struggle with imposter-esque feelings, often manifesting in feeling like the odd one out — like everyone else is “getting it” and I’m missing something. Conversations with Alex have helped me connect this to broader queer politics and understand it as a response to institutional structures that are often, at their core, exclusionary. I am also acutely aware that PhD students face a future career space that is increasingly shaped by the neoliberal techniques of competition, the appearance of limited resources, fewer permanent opportunities, and a mounting onus on self-branding and self-promotion, or what [Wendy Brown might call creating mini-capitals](#) within the academy. Don’t get me wrong — mentoring and being mentored isn’t going to solve these problems by itself, but I think it is one way of forming a small but powerful connection across this difficult and often hostile terrain to share resources, knowledge, and care.

What does your mentorship dynamic look like? What kinds of discussions do you have?

Alex: We’ve met online about four or five times over the course of a bit less than a year. Lizzie usually proposes a number of things that we attend to, be them theoretical issues in ongoing work and troubleshooting ideas, or more zoom-out existential issues such as talking about one’s role in academia, selfcare, and future plans, to practical things such as postdoc applications, the job market, or what is involved in book publishing. Sometimes Lizzie has sent something in advance for me to review, other times we just talk through issues as they arise.

Lizzie: I feel quite privileged that Alex has been so generous with his time. He has offered support across various areas of academic life: feedback on applications (that unquestionably has helped me secure positions!), sharing copies of his successful postdoc applications, helping me think through theoretical knots, recommending relevant texts, and just offering a supportive space. We’ve discussed everything: from how long it takes to secure a book deal to how to manage researching difficult topics, as [my current research](#) entails analysing transphobic discourse that is now commonplace in the U.K. socio-political landscape. These types of discussions are invaluable in demystifying some of the more hard-to-reach aspects of academia.

What do you think has been a highlight and/or learning that you will take from this experience?

Alex: The highlight was having [Julia Chan](#), former facilitator of the [SSN mentoring programme](#), and now Assistant Professor, University of Calgary, connect Lizzie and me. While having only been in my position as an Assistant Professor for two years, I honestly felt I was too junior to offer much, but Julia encouraged the connection, and it has been fruitful. Many of the hoops we have to jump through in academia are a black box for which no blueprint is provided, and for queers this can be especially true. So mentorship has been partially about sharing what I have learned, mistakes I've made, and what others have taught me, to help me (somewhat) successfully jump through the hoops I've jumped through (however big or small). Mentorship is also a mutual exchange, as I've learned a lot from Lizzie who is an incredibly thoughtful scholar, and I look forward to their forthcoming vital work offering a queer and trans perspective of surveillance as sensory in a concerning political context of increasing hate towards trans people. Overall the process of mentorship has given more purpose to things, it makes you step outside yourself, and helps as an antidote to some of the toxic elements of the academy.

Lizzie: In one of our first conversations together, Alex suggested taking creative writing classes. This turned out to be — without being dramatic! — one of those pieces of advice that changes the trajectory of your life. I immediately booked myself onto an introductory course and have taken a handful of other courses since. As a result, I'm exploring new aspects of my thinking and writing, my career ambitions, as well as my sense of self. What a freeing experience it is to write for pleasure, without worrying about what the examiners will think...! Alex has also helped me think through the messiness of doing community-based work and being in academia, two worlds I was having trouble reconciling in my everyday life. Early on, he recommended Dorothy E. Smith's [The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology](#), and encouraged me to approach this messiness from a political, thoughtful, and productive way. I now recognise I am not alone and that many researchers and community-based practitioners experience it. As well as sharing the tangible help Alex has given, I ultimately hope to emulate the strong model he sets as a mentor and one day pass along what he has taught me to future queer scholars.