



Enabling researchers to thrive

SUSTAIN is an innovative year-long programme of training and support for female researchers run by the Academy of Medical Sciences since 2015, which aims to develop participants' leadership and career potential.

An independent evaluation in 2021 found that:

- 91% of participants responding strongly agreed/agreed the programme had helped them thrive as independent researchers,
- 86% of participants responding strongly agreed/agreed the programme improved confidence in their leadership ability,
- 98% of mentors responding reported improved career planning skills in their mentee.

This booklet is intended as an introductory toolkit to support people looking to create their own researcher development programme similar to SUSTAIN. It is meant to be an introduction, rather than a comprehensive guide: it aims to help you start exploring possible components of your programme, and to highlight key considerations.



The Academy's SUSTAIN programme has three core components:



A programme of career development workshops



One-to-one mentoring from a research leader



Peer support in small groups and across the cohort

This booklet has more information on all three areas, outlining the Academy's approach and key considerations for each. Although we've found that combining these three elements is particularly impactful, any combination of these, or even just one, can still have a profound impact.

We hope the following information offers a helpful starting point for developing your own programme. We know how daunting it can be creating something from scratch and we're keen to share our experience and help you however we can.

If after reading the information, you're unsure what to do next, please get in touch with us at sustain@acmedsci.ac.uk we love talking about our work and would be delighted to help you get started.



Career development workshops

A core component of the Academy programme is our series of career development workshops. These act as an initial way for the cohort to meet and get to know each other, as well as providing vital training. Each session is tailored to support participants through the challenges of combining research, teaching, clinical practice, caring and other responsibilities where relevant.

Across the cohorts we have run so far, the workshops have included:

- Time management
- Negotiation skills
- Setting up a research team for success
- Developing your leadership style

It is important to consider your topics carefully and to ask your participants what training they need.

Given our focus, SUSTAIN programme workshops often discuss skills that women are given less opportunities to develop, or are of particular value to women at this career stage. If your programme is aimed at a different group, you may not want to offer this same combination of workshops.

If you are offering peer coaching and/or mentoring as part of your programme, we recommend you offer training to everyone involved, so that all parties have the same expectations of the coaching/mentoring relationship.

Mentoring

One-to-one mentoring is a core component of our SUSTAIN programme, providing early-career researchers with career development support by pairing them with a research leader in a different institution who can give unbiased support. The Academy uses an enabling, non-directive approach to help mentees make critical decisions using the developmental model of mentoring. Mentors are there to provide a framework for making career choices and signpost information and resources.

If you are hoping to include mentoring as part of your programme, consider who your mentors will be. Ideally there will need to be a seniority gap between mentee and mentor, to help with objectivity and give the benefit of experience. Having a mentor who is similar in seniority to the mentee is not necessarily a barrier, though there is a chance that the relationship will become akin to peer-coaching.

You should also consider conflicts of interest: for example, if you are running something for your department, and a mentor is from the same faculty as their mentee, they likely won't have the necessary objectivity. This is important, as it may impede the success of the relationship. Ideally, see if you can work with another department or even institution to provide mentors.

For more information, explore our free mentoring resources at acmedsci.ac.uk/mentoring



Peer support

Although in some ways less tangible than the mentoring or workshops, peer support has the potential to be one of the most high-impact parts of your programme. This is particularly important because, relative to the other two areas, it is often much easier to set up, and less time and cost intensive to maintain. The Academy approach to peer support is broken into two parts: peer-coaching and creating a network.

Firstly, the SUSTAIN participants are trained on peer-coaching by a facilitator and split into co-coaching groups of three so they can meet regularly throughout the programme to coach each other. When matching people for co-coaching, it is important to consider participant location, group size, conflicts of interest, and expectations around meeting frequency and level of support. We have found that groups of three work better than pairs for our programme.

The second part, creating a network, is less tangible but still important. Many SUSTAIN participants tell us that the most impactful part of the programme for them was getting like-minded people in a room together – with some of the same challenges and ambitions – and creating a space where they can support one another. The cohorts often create a chat group to stay in touch with each other between workshops and beyond the programme, and this can provide invaluable support.

Other considerations

Selection

Selection for the Academy's SUSTAIN programme is done randomly. This is because we have always had more applications than there are places, and this method was deemed the fairest option available. We recommend that you consider how you will select participants for your programme, particularly if you anticipate having more applicants than places. A competitive selection process may not always be appropriate if the aim of your programme is to support those from disadvantaged groups. It is also worth noting that other selection methods (e.g., interviews) are much more resource and time intensive, and may introduce bias.

Resources

Before embarking on developing a programme, it is vital to consider how you will resource it. The Academy's own programme has a significant cost per participant and a small team of staff. You can achieve a lot with more modest budgets and resources, but it is easy to underestimate the time commitment required for developing and maintaining a programme. Explore the funding and support available to you and consider what components you want to prioritise.

For more information please visit acmedsci.ac.uk/sustain or contact us at sustain@acmedsci.ac.uk



The SUSTAIN programme is funded by:

