



‘VISTA Sistas’: The Personal and Sectoral Transformative Powers of VISTA: A Mid-Career Self-Development Programme for Women in Higher Education

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In higher education, for many women at mid-career stage, the *systemic issues of inequality* which have impacted on their careers are often compounded by the *challenges* of having spent some time out of the workplace through maternity, parental, and/or caring responsibilities (Brown, 2015; Danhauer et al., 2019). This can mean that many women at mid-career are struggling to find their career identity and may find themselves pigeon-holed into restrictive roles and self-identities. They

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would greatly benefit from the opportunity to engage in ‘mid-career identity development and career re-framing’ (HEA, 2020). This programme aimed to redress these systemic inequalities, often compounded by the challenges of having spent some time out of the workplace.

Initially developed by a programme team in DkIT, as well as the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Units of Dublin City University (DCU) and the University of Galway and funded by the HEA under the Gender Equality Education (GEE) funding stream, this Mid-Career Development Programme provided a modular, supported programme (delivered inter-institutionally) to foster self-development and networking skills, as well as the development of detailed career development plans for the participants, with specific objectives and agreed timeframes. The programme provided participants with a unique opportunity for personal growth and development, supported by a senior sponsor from within their institution. There were also opportunities to develop a powerful peer network within and across the participating institutions, opening up new perspectives of benefit to participants and institutions.¹

The target audience comprised women (or those who identified as women) in HE, with at least 15 years of experience in professional, support, technical, and academic roles. The pilot programme included 10 staff from each of the three higher level institutions, namely, Dublin City University (DCU), Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), and University of Galway (UG). The official roll-out of the programme, which also consisted of 30 participants, was widened to include three additional HE institutions—Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), University College, Cork (UCC), and University of Limerick (UL).

The programme comprised an introductory half-day session, with three core workshops, each involving some preparation and post-workshop reflection. In consultation with the programme team, these workshops were devised by two separate consulting agencies who were successful in the tender process; ‘Mojo For Leaders’ and ‘Carbon Coaching’. This collaboration with specialists external to the institutions (and indeed higher education) was a crucial element of deepening the impact of the

¹ Dedication—We dedicate this paper to all the ‘VISTA Sistas’ who planned, delivered, and/or participated in VISTA programme and made it such a transformative experience for all. We are particularly indebted to pilot participant Suzanne Cullen-Smith, (DkIT) who created the ‘VISTA Sistas’ title when creating the social media groups and allowed us to use the term.

workshops. A customised online hub was available to the participants in which learning materials, reflection exercises and further developmental reading were available to all.

During the workshops, participants worked collaboratively to prime themselves for success, develop personal and professional skills, and move from vision to action for positive career development. The programme also incorporated appropriate sponsorship to support these participants in their empowering journey. In addition, all participants chose a skip-level sponsor within their institution, and detailed guidelines were provided to both participants and sponsors to support these interactions. Three one-day modules were delivered in a blended method, while face-to-face networking events included a high degree of interactivity, allowing for much reflection and self-reflection, engagement, and network building, in addition to many opportunities for ongoing collaboration.

Each participant was sponsored through the programme by a 'skip level' manager (i.e. their Line Manager's Manager). Specific objectives and stretch goals were committed to by each participant in consultation with their sponsor. Guidelines were provided to participants and sponsors to ensure objectives were appropriately challenging and measurable. The relationship with the sponsor was a crucial support for the participants, as it allowed them to reflect and set challenging objectives to ensure they achieved maximum benefit. This relationship between participant and sponsor spanned a 9-month period so that meaningful progress could be achieved. In addition to meeting with their sponsors, the participants also completed a Personal Development Plan (PDP) in advance. The aim of the Personal Development Planning was to support the participant in turning their learning into action. This included identifying one stretch goal to undertake during the three-month duration of the programme and two further stretch goals to undertake during the six months after completion. The PDP process also encouraged reflection and the development of a Career Design Journal.

The online hub and toolkit of resources were an essential means of supporting formal module content and self-reflection. Participants wrote personal reflections after each module and were also surveyed immediately before and after the programme to ensure specific impact was measured. The pilot programme ran from January to April 2022, while the first full roll-out of the programme took place from September to December 2022.

To measure and showcase the impact of the programme, data were gathered by means of pre—and post-participation reflections, which were personally anonymous but specific to each institution. These were thematically analysed with reported levels of engagement and success examined. Themes included: Autonomy, Career Development, Learning and Development, Network, Organisational Support, and Self-Insight. There was an improvement across all themes after participating in the programme (both in the pilot and full programme data—(see table 12.1)).

This feedback showed a focus on the development of ‘career identity’, as well as enhanced self-awareness and supportive networking, including face-to-face meetings and an online collaboration space (two social media platforms: a WhatsApp group for attendees and facilitators to stay connected, and a VISTA group on Teams at DkIT)—the ‘VISTA Sistas’.²

More details of these positive outcomes include the opportunity which the programme provided for reflection:

The main benefit of the programme was allowing the time and space to consider my own goals, strengths, weaknesses, etc. This was particularly valuable in the company of women who were at a similar phase in life/career.

The programme also incorporated networking opportunities, which participants found highly positive, reflecting that the opportunity to meet with female colleagues across different universities to speak to them about their experiences was very valuable:

² According to pilot participant 1, the title ‘VISTA Sistas’ was ‘devised to capture the idea of sisterhood’. Social media platforms were set up with ‘a hope for continued engagement, networking, support, encouragement, camaraderie, and connection between the members of the VISTA programme. Connections between women are often formed based on emotional support and validation and these were effectively woven into the format of the VISTA workshops’. Although the interactions were initially numerous, these tailed off with the progress of time. However, there continue to be positive on-going effects, such as ‘spontaneous invitations to meet in person, conversations about cross-disciplinary project collaborations, committee co-membership, and invitations for student supervision or examination’. Looking to the future with increased numbers of VISTA participants, it is hoped that ‘the availability of opportunities to re-engage with the ‘VISTA Sistas’ may have a role to play in supporting women in academia to get what they need from the VISTA programme: whether the encouragement and confidence to forge ahead on their own path with their existing networks or to dip in and out of the network to give and receive encouragement and support as needed, ultimately meeting the VISTA goal of empowering women to be able to do what we need to do’.

Table 12.1 Impact of programme on participants

<i>% change per statement: "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"</i>						
Statement scores	Pilot phase			Full roll out		
	At outset	At end	Change	At outset	At end	Change
Theme: autonomy						
I have or can create opportunities to use my key strengths at work	87%	93%	+ 6%	83%	100%	+ 17%
I have or can create opportunities to do the work that gives me most satisfaction	60%	86%	+ 26%	61%	78%	+ 17%
I can shape my work so that I am making a difference in the world that I want to make	57%	76%	+ 19%	57%	78%	+ 22%
Theme—Career						
I know what areas of my career I am keen to develop further, and I have a plan for doing that	53%	93%	+ 40%	26%	83%	+ 57%
I have short-term and medium-term goals for developing my career	47%	83%	+ 36%	17%	78%	+ 61%
Theme—Learning and Development						
I regularly set stretch objectives for myself	50%	66%	+ 16%	30%	61%	+ 30%
When I try something and succeed: That's fantastic; When I try something and it doesn't work out: That's learning	83%	97%	+ 13%	74%	87%	+ 13%
I confidently ask for and act on advice and feedback from people whose opinions I trust	73%	83%	+ 9%	61%	87%	+ 26%
Theme—Network						
I have a trusted network of people across the institution I work in who provide support and different perspectives	63%	76%	+ 13%	48%	57%	+ 9%

(continued)

Table 12.1 (continued)

<i>% change per statement: "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"</i>						
I have a network of people from other third-level institutions who provide support and different perspectives	27%	45%	+ 18%	26%	43%	+ 17%
I seek out multiple perspectives and consider the needs of all stakeholders, including myself, when making decisions	70%	86%	+ 16%	52%	87%	+ 35%
Theme—Organisational Support						
My institution supports my personal development	43%	69%	+ 26%	52%	65%	+ 13%
My career development is supported by my organisation	43%	69%	+ 26%	30%	61%	+ 30%
Theme—Self-Insight						
I know what my key strengths are	77%	100%	+ 23%	74%	100%	+ 26%
I understand my personality traits and preferences	67%	100%	+ 33%	52%	100%	+ 48%
I understand how my personality traits and preferences may interact with others' traits and preferences	53%	100%	+ 47%	52%	100%	+ 48%
I have a clear intention around the unique difference I want to make through my work	50%	76%	+ 26%	48%	74%	+ 26%
I recognise and raise awareness of unconscious bias in myself and others	50%	72%	+ 22%	52%	74%	+ 22%
I manage my energy and resilience	53%	86%	+ 33%	39%	61%	+ 22%

I had always detested networking as a negative, contrived activity but now I realise that it can be very beneficial and beyond that, it is an essential part of progressing—recognition and exposure are things I rarely thought about before.

Another key outcome of the programme related to self-recognition, recognising strengths and values:

It was wonderful—really energising—and demystified a lot of the barriers that I was facing, giving me tools to recognise myself and identify the areas that I need to focus more on.

The feedback gathered showed a sense of empowerment, with participants stating that working with others in sessions boosted confidence and supported participants' honesty and openness in their contributions:

This programme allowed people to have a voice and to gain support and encouragement from the participants which has certainly helped me to re-evaluate my career but also to give myself a pat on the back for what I have achieved so far.

The participants also reported the importance of the access to the sponsor—participants welcomed the opportunity to have access to senior members of the institutions via the sponsorship element.

In summary, the key reported outcomes of the programme for participants relate to Autonomy; Career; Learning and Development; Network; Organisational Support; and Self-Insight.

Institutional impacts included accessing untapped potential by providing a 'breakthrough' experience for staff at mid-career stage; creating new role models for cultural change; and providing access to senior figures, via the sponsorship element of the programme, hence improving vertical integration and networking. Sectoral benefits included greater collaboration between institutions; instigating a cultural shift through creating a network of positive voices and influencers, and the sharing of best practice.

A participant of the pilot roll-out of the programme highlighted the positive effects which the programme effected for her personally:

The VISTA programme was a transformative professional and personal development experience. With the guidance of the facilitators and encouragement of colleagues on the programme, I found the safe space to identify my personal mission for the next stage of my career and life. It has given me the courage to finally embark on a PhD after years of wondering if I could or should. There are not enough ways to say 'go raibh maith agaibh' (thank you).

Another participant from the full roll-out commented on the benefits of the camaraderie and cordiality of the group:

I participated in the VISTA programme to evaluate where I am currently at in my career path and where I'd like to get to. What I realised is that I really love my current role and want my future path to stay on this track. I came to that conclusion and learned a lot about myself in the process thanks to VISTA's holistic and heuristic facilitators and the generosity of other participants in sharing their stories and listening to mine. I strongly recommend VISTA to other women.

Constructive feedback regarding some gaps and confusions needing refinement also proved crucial in building the programme. These centred on:

1. Confusion around stretch goals: participants should develop their stretch goals together.
2. Online versus in-person sessions: full-day online sessions require high amounts of energy to remain focused, in contrast to the ease of sociable interactions which characterise the in-person sessions.
3. Too much covered in a short period: avoid information overload with a more structured delivery.
4. Timing of sessions: the semesterised timeline of the programme was intense and should be scheduled further apart.
5. More tailored content: real-world examples and case studies from the higher education sector would help deepen engagement with the learning points.

On reflection, the benefits of the programme are multi-faceted. The programme team collaborated very well and modules were delivered with warmth by the facilitators.³ It was hugely rewarding to work with amazing

³ In reflecting on their experiences, the facilitators praised 'the enthusiasm, collaborative spirit and solid intention to make a meaningful difference to the careers and lives of women by everyone involved in the design, administration and delivery of the programme'. They were also hugely impressed by the 'sincerity, courage, openness to learn, level of commitment, emotional intelligence and power' of all the participants. In describing their most special moments, they recounted the powerful impact of hearing two participants from the pilot phase speak from the heart about the huge, positive difference the programme had made to them. They also spoke of the inspiration for collective empowerment contained in the participant-generated acronym ('Vision Inspiring Sisters to Action'): 'this was a real-life example of women collaborating to contribute something meaningful to the collective...it was a privilege to be involved, both in collaboration with the team and other coaches and with the unstoppable women involved'.

women in higher education who shared their experiences and built their skills and confidence to contribute to a more equal and empowering higher education sector in the future.

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