



The ESTRO mentoring programme: an interview with a mentee-mentor couple

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The first (pilot) edition of the mentoring programme run by the European Society for Radiotherapy and Oncology (ESTRO) came to an end last September. It was organised by Jolien Heukelom and Steven Petit on behalf of the young ESTRO committee and the Education Council. The programme was rated nine out of ten by both mentees and mentors, and it will continue! People who wish to be mentees in the 2023 edition can now apply at <https://www.estro.org/About/ESTRO-Organisation-Structure/Committees/Young-Committee>.

In this newsletter article, Steven Habraken and Anthony Chalmers look back at their time as a mentee-mentor couple. Both agreed to take part in an interview moderated by Steven Petit.

Steven Habraken is a medical physicist at Erasmus Medical Center and Holland Particle Therapy Center in The Netherlands. Anthony Chalmers is chair of clinical oncology at the University of Glasgow in the UK.

Steven Petit: *Steven, in the speed-dating session you spoke to three or four different potential mentors for ten minutes each. Do you remember what made Anthony your first choice?*

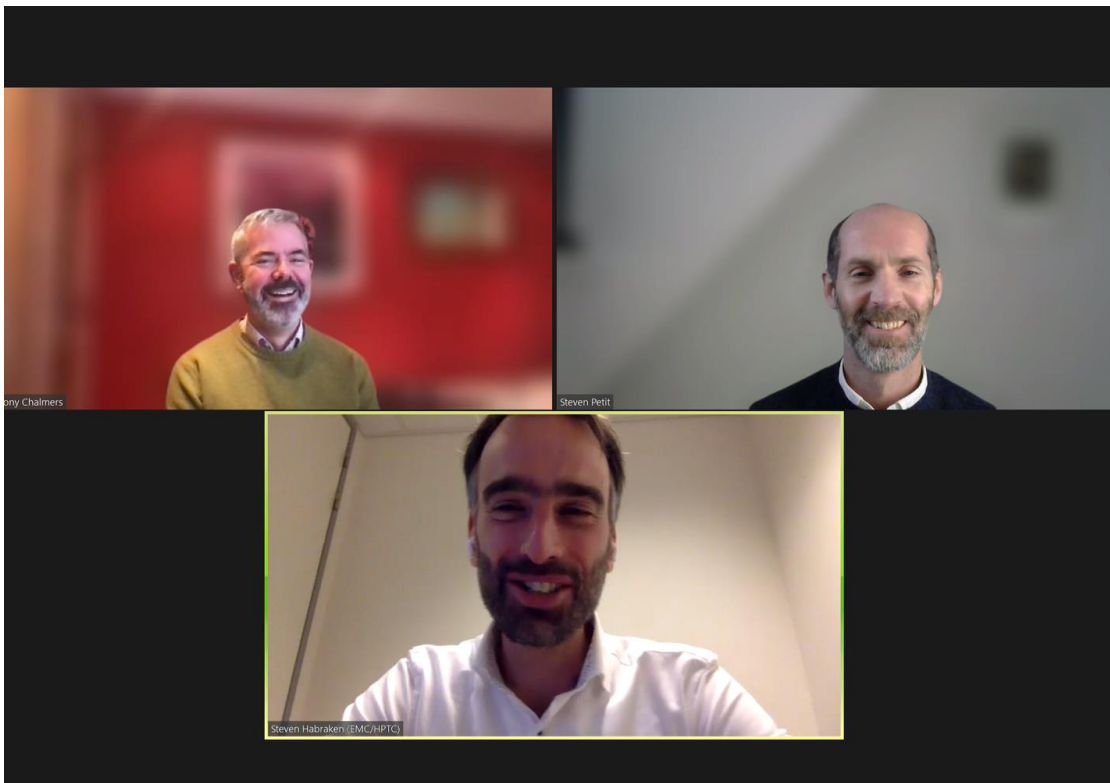
Steven Habraken: In those ten minutes, he was asking very right and relevant questions. The first round of questions I was sort of able to answer. The second round of questions already got me thinking in directions that explained the complexity of the environment I work in and the challenges I was facing.

Steven Petit: *So it was not the suggestions he was making, but really the questions he was asking?*

Steven Habraken: Yes, that is true. They were well thought-through questions, not just the arbitrary polite questions, but getting to the right topics directly. So it was completely clear to me after those ten minutes that Anthony would be my preferred mentor.

Steven Petit: *Anthony, how was the first real meeting you had with Steven after the speed dating?*

Anthony Chalmers: So this was really interesting. I asked Steven to tell me about his position. He had already sent me some information by email. And I was a bit confused about the many different institutions and projects he was involved in; for instance, which parts of his work were research and which parts more clinical? And really, I was mainly asking questions just so I could understand what the situation was. And it was so complicated, that I remember asking Steven to put it all down in a diagram, and I think that was really, really helpful. Certainly for me, but I think it might also have been helpful for Steven as well. I kept referring back to that diagram in later meetings.



Anthony Chalmers, mentor (top left); and Steven Habraken, mentee (bottom); were interviewed by Steven Petit (top right)

Steven Petit: Steven, was it helpful for you also to answer these questions?

Steven Habraken: Yes, it was very helpful, because indeed this degree of complexity for me is my daily routine. But it's also something I do not often reflect upon. And just making this diagram made me much more aware of how complex the situation really is, and what different types of relationships I have with many people that showed up in this diagram. We discussed each relation in detail. What are the hierarchical lines? Is it formal or informal? What is my responsibility in this sub-group, or with respect to a certain PhD student? What are the responsibilities of others? So the diagram and questions really helped me to become more aware of my own role in the process and more capable of managing the different relations myself in a better way. I know now much more clearly what to expect from a certain person in a certain position - but also what not to expect from them. That improved things quite a lot, actually.

Anthony Chalmers: I remember that session being very, very easy for me. I didn't have to prepare very much and asking the questions just felt very natural to me. I suppose I was putting myself in Steven's position and trying to imagine what it would be like having to manage and respond to all these different relationships. I was just asking questions to understand what it was like. I think I did not make any suggestions.

Steven Petit: Anthony, if this had been done 15 years earlier in your career, how do you think you would have been then as a mentor?

Anthony Chalmers: In theory, I could have done exactly the same thing 15 years earlier. But what I think was different was that I did not feel I needed to show Steven that I had the answers. And I think maybe at an earlier stage in your career, if you are told to mentor somebody, you might think you're supposed to know all the answers. That is something I have learnt from experience: that you don't need to know any of the answers and you can still be quite helpful to somebody just by asking questions.

But there is one point that I really want to get across, just in case you don't ask it. Initially when I heard that Steven had chosen me, I was a little bit surprised because I'd also met with some clinical oncologists in the speed-dating session. Somewhat lazily I assumed that I would probably end up being paired with somebody in the same specialty as me. If I had any concerns, it was that I wouldn't know enough about physics or the world of physics to be able to be helpful to Steven. But now I actually think that has been a real advantage. That was the big surprise and learning point for me from this whole experience. Not being part of that world was actually very liberating. I had to ask the questions purely to understand what was going on. I didn't have a huge amount of knowledge myself, so I was less tempted to try and say "here's what I think you should do" because I had no idea myself what the answer was. It was really enlightening that knowing less about the situation has enabled me to be a better mentor.

Steven Habraken: I fully agree with that. A fresh view from somebody with different expertise who still knows the multidisciplinary collaborative setting we work in was really very valuable.



Steven Petit: *Anthony, you mentioned that the first meeting was very easy and natural for you. Were the following meetings more challenging?*

Anthony Chalmers: They were a little bit different, because we'd already established that groundwork. In the following meetings, each time Steven had made significant progress in all the areas that we had discussed previously. It was almost miraculous. That felt really, really rewarding.

Steven Habraken: In the first meetings, I made notes and sent them to Anthony. I was surprised that Anthony actually read the notes and provided detailed feedback on them in line with what we had discussed. Later on, there was maybe a bit less need to make notes. I did still take some notes myself, but I don't think I shared them any longer.

Steven Petit: *The pilot programme lasted a year. How did you experience that?*

Steven Habraken: In total, we took 14 months. Sometimes the intervals between meetings were short and sometimes long. I think in the last meeting I felt that we had reached a point where we discussed many of the relevant topics, at least for now. We discussed staying in touch by email. I will keep Anthony informed on where I am and where I'm going and how things are going. So the one year worked out well, in our case.

Anthony Chalmers: I think Steven achieved a lot quite quickly. So if we had stopped after six or even three months, it would still have been productive. I felt that that was quite unusual and I'm sure for other people it might take a bit longer. So I think a year is about right.

Steven Petit: *Steven, could you summarise in a few lines what the programme brought you?*

Steven Habraken: Awareness of my position and role in the complex collaborations I'm working in and the skills to interact with all these different people in a more self-aware and constructive way. Sounds a bit heavy, but I think that's the essence.

Steven Petit: *How do you look back, Anthony? Also in relation to the time you invested in it.*

Anthony Chalmers: Ohhhh well, for the time invested I would say it was hugely rewarding. The main thing I got out of it was this awareness that you could be a very effective mentor to somebody in a different discipline and that that may indeed be advantageous. I do other sorts of mentoring activities, mostly more informal. I think I learned more from this process than I have from any of the other mentoring activities I've done. And I think, partly, that's because we had to write it down and think about it a little bit more. It's interesting because people often say you learn by your mistakes or by your failures. But here I felt very powerfully that I was learning from something that was working really well, which is really a nice situation. So, for example, in some of the other mentoring I do, I now make an effort to try to observe from the outside and try to ask open questions; to try to keep my own potential solutions out of the conversation. I'm part of an association that has also set up a mentorship scheme, which hasn't been going particularly well. But thanks to my experience with Steven, I've felt able to make quite a few suggestions to the board of the association on how it might be done more effectively.

Steven Petit: *Anthony, you mentioned a couple of times that it was hugely rewarding for you. What made it rewarding?*

Anthony Chalmers: It was seeing Steven evolve, becoming more confident and tackling some challenging issues in a really constructive way. To see such positive changes happening to somebody else is incredibly rewarding.

Steven Petit: *What do you think should be the most important character traits for a mentor?*

Anthony Chalmers: I think the most important is deriving pleasure from seeing more junior people do well and thrive, regardless of whether you benefit yourself from it or not. Also being able to have an open mind and not trying to impose your solutions. Being interested in interpersonal dynamics is probably quite important as well.

Steven Petit: *What would you say to potential mentors who may be interested in joining the programme, but are hesitating about whether they should?*

Anthony Chalmers: I would very strongly encourage people to sign up if they are considering it. It's been enjoyable and rewarding, both at the same time. It is not a huge investment of time. And yeah, I've learned a lot about being a good mentor. It has empowered



me in other areas. For example, I'm actively offering my "services" in our department to advise early career researchers. I would not have done that with such confidence before.

Steven Petit: Steven, the programme was organised by ESTRO. You may also have access to mentoring programmes in your own institute. Looking back, do you see advantages of joining the ESTRO mentoring programme?

Steven Habraken: Yes, from my point of view it was a big advantage [that the programme was run by ESTRO]. Indeed also internally in Erasmus MC it is possible to find mentors. I also had interactions with some people talking about career doubts or issues. But the advantage of Anthony, besides his personality and the interaction between the two of us, was that he was external and from a different discipline with different expertise. An external person offers a fresh and different perspective and can ask relevant questions that an internal person would probably never ask, because it may feel unnatural. It was nice to have an international mentor, given that there are some common cultural values. The personal chemistry made me feel comfortable to open up and discuss things that were not going smoothly.

Steven Petit: One last question -if you bumped into each other at ESTRO in Vienna, what would happen?

Steven Habraken (laughs): I would be happy to see Anthony in real life again. To say hello, shake hands, sit down have a chat over a cup of coffee.

Anthony Chalmers: Yes, or over a beer or wine! I would be interested to hear Steven present about his work, because we haven't really talked in detail about the content of your work, have we? It's been the bigger picture really, so that would be something I would be interested in.

