

Mentoring for Female Academics in the 21st Century: A Case Study of a South African University

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Abstract

This paper investigated the female academics' perceptions on mentoring in universities and how it can promote their career trajectory. The study adopted the qualitative methodology. Using evidence collected from a case study of a South African university and a sample size of purposively selected five senior female academics and a focus group of five junior female academics were used for the study. The research solicited data through interviews and document analysis. The results revealed that mentoring is there in universities theoretically but the practical concept appears to be surrounded by grey areas. There is a general lack of interest, knowledge and ignorance from the academics on mentoring and networking. Moreover, gender still influences the female academics perceptions on mentoring and networking in universities and a dearth of female role models promoted disintegration, inaccessibility and egoism within universities. The study concluded that mentoring of female academics should be formalised and on-going and that universities must look beyond gender on mentoring issues.

Keywords: Mentoring, Career Development, female academics, universities

Introduction

The need for guidance in academia through mentoring cannot be over emphasised because the demands in academia go far beyond teaching, administration, community engagement and research. This has led to recognition of mentoring in academia as a form of career development for academics in universities. However, mentoring has not been effective in many universities due organisational male supremacy that continues to steer precincts in the participation of females thus affecting the creation and progression of information in universities (Abugre and Kpinpuo, 2017). Mentorship has been pronounced as a relationship which is built amongst junior academics (beginner) and senior academics (proficient senior) through which expertise, skill, supervision and support are transmitted (irrespective of gender) from mentor to mentee (Waterman and He 2011; Monserrat et al., 2009; Thornton, 2014).

Background

Mentoring is a powerful individual development intervention that is expected to assist, support and guide academics in their career trajectory. Ingersoll et al., (2012); Abugre and Kpinpuo (2017); Friedman et al., (2018) state that academics who undergo mentoring experience higher levels of job satisfaction, self-efficacy, more productive and staff retention as compared to non-mentored academics. Literature also confirms that some of the problems and intricacies that female academics encounter with regard to their career mobility are ascribed to scanty mentorship and networking in universities (Zikhali and Maphosa, 2012). In the same line of thought, Shava and Ndebele (2014) in their study found out that the trials and complications encountered by female academics are ascribed to scarcity of mentoring in universities. As a result, this has promoted career stagnation of some female academics in favour of their career development. This calls for universities to formalise mentoring and come up with customised mentoring programs that align with their organisational culture.

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Johnson and Thomas (2012) advances that literature now calls for an assemblage of mentors so that female academics to be mentored. By and large, since universities are viewed as learning organisations (Fullan 2000) therefore, a serious consideration of implementing mentoring means university leaders will get the opportunity to hear and learn from the female academics experiences and how they can support them in developing their careers. Understandably so, these views are seconded by (Blackmore, 2004; Shaw, 2005; Nundulall and Reddy, 2011) who posit that for mentoring to be acknowledged as a central feature in universities, it must be significant to both mentor and mentee. As a result, it is imperative that universities come up with strategies of how mentoring can be offered to female academics so that they can realise their potential. This is because, the pursuit of an academic career is not without any challenges, fear and anxiety (Abugre and Kpinpuo, 2017). Undoubtedly, the foregoing sentiments indicate that mentoring is significant in today universities and cannot be understated because it is the foundation for building attainable goals for career development; creates vast opportunities for career mobility; assist female academics to understand the university context; and most importantly to redress gender imbalance that continues to subsists in most universities especially in the higher echelons of the university systems.

Accordingly, Beoku-Betts (2005) and Ramson (2013) point out that the career development of female academics is negatively affected because they are excluded from the partnerships, up-to-date linkages on university life as academics and obtain diminutive or no mentoring at all. Luke (2000) posits that the deeply entrenched socio cultural philosophies are also a causal factor that reinforces the dismissal of female academics being exposed mentoring and networking opportunities because there is a lack of intergenerational support among academics and in universities. Echoing the above, Stone and Coetzee (2005) posit that the problem lies in the fact that informal get-togethers between mentor and mentee interfaces are normally initiated in informal get-togethers in which female academics are generally marginalised. Accordingly, Friedman et al., (2018) argues that there is need for institutional level reforms that include the formation of better communication channels about the kinds of support available to academics. This means that attrition will be redressed and gender equity achieved because the gendered minority (female academics) will work in a conducive environment. Therefore, it is imperative, that the university leadership acknowledges the importance of mentoring and how it would be aligned with the three pillars of the university set up which are, research, community engagement and teaching and learning.

Additionally, a study conducted by (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2006) was indicative that female academics comprising of 24 percent were aware that informal networks were in existence in universities and these were used as a discriminatory tool between genders. Interestingly, male academics totalling a mere 6 percent agreed of being cognisant of such practices (Gardiner, 2007). This data is echoed by Jonnergard, Sweden, and Elg (2009) who highlight that mentoring and networking in universities comprises of a group of highly knowledgeable, mature and influential individuals with authoritative positions and reverence within the academia. Hence, they act as gatekeepers. As a result, individuals with marginal status or of a different gender have slim chances in being included. Yet, organisational career development initiatives, such as mentoring and networking, have served as a vehicle to females on their way to progressing within the workplace for dismantling the glass ceiling (Vinnicombe et al., 2004; Socratous, 2018).

Meanwhile, though the notion of lack of female mobility in universities is linked to lack of mentors, in practical sense, Forster (2005) is of the view that mentorship and networking amongst academics with different genders continuous to carry with it deleterious inferences. Further, the environment in which networking is conducted implies that the majority female academics may be forced to sacrifice their family and social duties in place of work commitments. This means that female academics continue to be caught up in a tangled web. This brings us to the reasons why Makombe and Geroy (2009) concluded that because of social customs together with ethnic morals, married female academics might not be expected to network informal gathering with male academics especially after working hours. As a result, this continues to block positive changes towards their upward mobility in academia.

Mabokela (2011) within her writings gives the answer to the above stated and postulates that the antidote to career growth of female academics is largely hinged on universities implementing prescribed networking and mentoring practices and training especially in the initial stages when they enter in universities as academics. The same author raised a pertinent point and underscored that, taking such a stance implies that, the senior academics that are expected to contribute as role models and mentors will also benefit from cross gender and cross cultural mentorship. This will lead to their success in the mentoring relationships.

Additionally, studies conducted in Zimbabwe and South Africa by Mudhovozi, Manyange and Mashamba (2013) and Ndebele, van Heerden and Chabaya (2013) showed analogous results with to the importance of mentoring. In a nutshell, these studies were indicative that having mentoring within universities was a strong signal showing commitment by university leaders on career development of their academics. As such, it was compulsory that departments and faculties make available a wide-range of programmes on mentoring.

Justifiably so, Socratous (2018); Harris (2007) and McGuire and Roger (2003), accentuate that it is a mockery that despite being in the 21st century and universities having gone through so many transformations and lessons on gender equality, the status quo subsist as far as female mentorship is concerned. Conclusively, vital suggestions are brought to the fore by these authors are that if mentoring and networking are taken seriously in universities, it would assist addressing the mismatch between theory and practice and closing the “cavity” by formalising mentoring and retaining female academics in universities.

Chowwen's study (2004) also illustrated the importance of mentoring in universities. Using a mixed methodology approach comprising of a sample size of 243 female professionals, the outcome of the study revealed an appalling picture. A total of 74% of the participants claimed they had not been mentored. Ironically, these mostly fell within the category of junior academics thus, endorsing the commonly held opinions that male academics would rather mentor each other instead of female academics (Gaidzanwa, 2005). The perplexing issue is that universities continue to move at a snail pace and appear to be retrogressive in as far as gender matters are concerned (Simbabe and Taiye, 2014). Understandably so, this has buttressed the acuity that impressive results are achievable when mentoring males as compared to mentoring female academics who have been accused of having the tendency of taking time off owing to child birth and nurturing, thus creating gaps in their academic practices (Shaw, 2005).

Researchers such as (Aiston, 2011; Ogbugo, 2006) side with the above authors and opine that the scarcity of mentors for female academics and their being quarantined in networking circles has cemented the existing organisational culture in universities. Cognisant to the foregoing, it is clear that there is a need for serious change of mind set such that mentoring of academics also matches strategic goals of a university so mentoring is not understood as an unformulated idea (Shaw, 2005). Concerns have also been raised that due to a dearth of mentoring, female academics miss out and lack incisive acumens into political processes of the university (Gardiner, 2007). Unfortunately this leads to their failure in knowing what to do or how to acquire research scholarships including information about processes involved in applying for advancement (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns & Marshall 2007).

Accordingly, Okurame (2008) states that insufficiency of genuine scholarships in universities which focus on mentoring undertakings subsists and ultimately propagates all the anomalies associated to mentoring and networking by female academics. In an endeavour to curtail the problems cited above, Osibanjo and Adenji (2012) opine that a supportive organisational culture is considered a motivational instrument and must be integrated in mentor relations and career mobility of female academics in universities. Moreover, the onus is on the mentors to be conscious of the mismatch between policy and practice.

An earlier study done by Bagihole (1994) showed that it is essential that senior academics assist their juniors by virtue of being survivors in the university system. Unfortunately, literature demonstrates that blame should not only be directed to universities failing to provide mentorship for their academics. Instead Stone and Coetze (2005) state that the Queen Bee Syndrome is to blame because it appears to have aggravated the problems that female academics encounter, specifically with regard to mentoring. Thus, instead of senior female academics mentoring their juniors, they subliminally endorsed the deprived position of female academics within the universities and endorse the existing the organisational culture that supports individualism (Derks, Ellemers, Laar and de Groot, 2011). This continues to handicap the position of female academics and blocking access to mentors and networking in universities.

Methodology

The qualitative methodology was used in this study because it enabled the researchers to understand the female academic's positions, experiences, challenges and opportunities within the academia.

Participants and Setting

A sample of 5 senior and 5 junior female academics were selected from a South African University. The participants were selected according to the number of years they had been lecturing in their university. This was done by selecting those participants with at least 10 (ten) years representing senior academics and 5 (five) years for junior female academics. The researcher was guided by the fact that senior female academics have experienced numerous changes and modifications that the universities have gone through such as growth in student's enrolments and academic staff and policy changes. The motivation for selecting junior female academics was premised on the view that separating junior female academics from the senior female academics would diminish the probabilities of getting predisposed answers on the phenomenon under study.

Instrumentation

An interview schedule was used to collect data from the senior and the junior female academics. All participants responded to the same interview questions and triangulation was adhered to through document analysis. All transcriptions were done manually after being electronically and manually recorded.

Results

Closing the cavity between theory and practice by formalising mentoring in the 21st century University

The participants were asked whether they had been exposed to mentoring and networking in their careers and the challenges they have faced concerning mentoring. The following responses are from the senior female academics P1, P3 and these specifically epitomise the absence of mentoring and networking.

P1 disclosed:

I was never exposed to all these things that you are talking about, we are not allocated mentors, no role models, you are on your own and you are thrown into deep end, if you are not a good swimmer you certainly drown. I feel as if I am a signpost of this department because I don't go to any workshops, conferences and seminars as much as my male colleagues do, so how will I network?

Likewise P3 stated:

Mentored by who? If I can tell you my first experience as a lecturer in this university was the most difficult, horrible and torturous experience for me.....I was just taken to the lecture room of about 650 first year students and the lecturer who was leaving said to me "this is your class and class this is Miss so and so your new lecturer, it was a huge reality check for me, I didn't even know where to begin.

On the other hand some participants in FGP1 pointed out that there was some sort of mentoring/induction within their university but, it was too generalised because it encompassed both academic and non-academic staff. Concerns were also raised that the organisational milieu remained too individualised and undoubtedly signified working in isolation. The FGP1 stated:

We had to find our own feet, who has time to show you what has to be done or to act as your role model, we do have senior academics here both male and female but they just do not offer to help, you even get scared to go and ask for help at times, there is just a lot of individualism in this institution..... It's you do your stuff I do mine..... You stick to your modules and I will do the same attitude". They further added "so many things are done wrongly here, because even during induction week, which is supposed to give us a chance to meet and network just as academics, you will find that the University makes it a mixed affair of academic and non-academics. It is high time that the University creates awareness about mentorship and networking. This will even promote knowledge sharing and teamwork among academics.

Despite not receiving any mentoring, the responses of the junior academics showed that they also lack self-confidence and assertiveness to approach their seniors for assistance. The majority of the senior female academics where in tandem with the juniors who elucidated when they first entered academia that there was lack of supervision from experienced academics and no one took time to show them how to cultivate their careers. Therefore, scanty mentorship may be implied to as a "bad habit" which is passed on to new academics. However, the policies observed through document analysis indicate mentorship should be initiated to all academics the instant they start work in the university so that better prospects are created for them to further their careers.

On the other hand, representing senior academics P4 and some of the participants in FGP1 claims were made that mentoring and networking was largely dependent on whether senior academics were interested in being role model and mentoring you or not since it was not authorised by the university. The following extracts are confirmation that there are pockets of mentoring but not throughout the whole university:

P4 revealed:

When I first started as a new academic in this University, the then HOD was male and we really worked well together, he took me under his wing, showed me what and how to do my academic work, I was his shadow in everything that had to do with being an academic.

Another participants in FGP1 added:

my mentor is male and he is not patient at all, but I appreciate that he has helped me to realise my potential, and he introduced me to a number of academics and professionals who are in a similar field as ours from different organisations and universities.

Evidently, there are pockets of good practices which can arouse the intrinsic desire for career development of female academics by being mentored by either gender. The female academics maintained it was the duty of the university to come with different strategies that are interlinked with mentoring and role modelling so as to preserve the female academics within the university structures because they are prospective leaders and role models for the next generation of academics. Cited below are the views of P2 and P5:

P2 stated:

I believe there is a huge gap between junior female academics and senior female academics, less females are coming into academia and the only way to retain them is to target junior academics the moment they enter academia, give them mentors, role models and a chance to attend as many workshops, conferences, seminars as possible to network and to develop their careers.

P5 also added:

Honestly, I think the University needs to take stock and realise how they can not only attract female academics to join the academia, but they also have to come up with means and strategies to keep the few of us that are remaining in the system such as mentoring programmes.

In short, there is need for universities through their scholars to stimulate collegiality and team work notwithstanding age or experience. Simply, if mentoring is a laid down rule, the older academics will without question be tutor the junior ones because they have the know-how and experience.

Discussion

Mentoring is an influential and interactive relationship whereby a subordinate is counselled, supervised, assisted and driven in the right direction by an expert and older academic on how to realise career development (Barczyk, 2011). Despite the extant literature highlighting that academics in universities are expected to benefit considerably when they are mentored, the findings of the research revealed otherwise because the majority of the participants had not been mentored. This was inconsistent with the analysed documents which unequivocally stated that all academics had the right to be mentored immediately they take up their appointment.

Though (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005; Socratous, 2018) say that career development in universities can be attained through expert guidance in the form of mentoring, the study showed that regardless of lack of guidance by senior academics it was anticipated that the juniors would integrate into the existing organisational culture with no questions asked. The results corroborate with (Mama and Barma, 2007, views that it is critical that from the onset the orientation of new academics is integrated with mentoring, role modelling and networking. Moreover, such a platform can be used as a strategy to state the norms and code of practice of the institution (Abugre and Kpinpuo, 2017)

It also emerged from the study that the problem of lack of team work existed between junior and senior academics; with the junior academics citing that assistance given to them was inconsequential. These observations align with a study done by Okinawan and Powell cited by Stone and Coetzee (2005) that female academics that hold strategic positions did not mentor their subordinates. The above is contradictory to what Schulze (2009) concluded, this scholar points out that absence of mentoring in universities is premised on the nonexistence or inadequacy of time among female academics, with blame being directed to too much instructional and administrative work in universities. Further, the findings of the study give the impression that the concept of mentoring is swept underneath the carpet yet, all academics were expected to be well grounded in the 3 pillars of the university namely, community engagement, teaching and learning and publications for career growth.

Linked to the above is a study by Tetty (2009) which established deprivation of mentoring to some academics may incite them to think of their career mobility as impossible. Moreover, such judgements may be more pronounced in an institutional setting where contentment is lacking. Undeniably so, this calls for clear role descriptions of all the stakeholders in the university if optimistic inputs are to be achieved through mentoring and networking. Despite mentoring being viewed as a tool for bringing about affirmative changes in universities (Geber and Nyanjom, 2009) the junior participants further verified that what they read in black and white in their university policies did not match with their everyday experiences. These results reinforce the preceding interpretations that universities must show an obligation and be cognisant that it is paramount that mentoring must not be seen as lip service instead must be implemented in universities to help reduce anomalies faced by female academics.

Meanwhile, a minority of senior and junior academics admitted being mentored by both male and female academics and explained how this had positively assisted to reach their fullest potential. But, the concept of male academics mentoring females is not consistent with what was found by Coronel, Moreno and Carraso's research (2010) that mentoring interactions concerning male and female academics is problematic as such benefits from mentoring female academics are prone to be paltry. Consequently, the data from the study suggests that there is lack of knowledge sharing and team building and learning among academics in universities in respect to mentoring.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a dearth of mentoring being experienced by female academics in universities leading to endorsement of fragmentation and individualism within their university. The study further concludes that there is need for theory to match practice on mentorship as this can assist female academics to develop a sense of professional identity and growth within their university.

Recommendations

The study recommends that there should be formalised and on-going mentoring in universities so that female academics can experience career mobility. Moreover, universities should strive to come up with approaches in which to improve mentoring of their academics under the guidance of their senior academics. The study further recommends that female academics should be supported and guided by both male and female academics in mentoring and networking. Hence, professional support through mentoring is vital in universities.

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