

Navigating the world of academic mentoring

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As students traverse from their academic to professional life, academic mentoring is a useful tool that can offer direction, support, and encouragement. The academic mentor-mentee system has a long history and has been applied in different ways at different times. In this globalised era, students must be able to quickly adapt to new information and ideas because information is more readily available than ever. Also, the increasing importance of interdisciplinary learning in the 21st century presents another difficulty. An academic mentor can be especially helpful in this situation by guiding students through complicated information and pointing them toward reliable knowledge sources. Mentoring, like any tool, if misused or abused, could have detrimental effects on students. Therefore, contextualisation of mentoring system is necessary due to the specific opportunities and problems of the 21st century.

Acknowledging Psychosocial Challenges

According to Erik Erikson theory of psychosocial development, there are eight phases that people go through during their lifespan. A psychological crisis occurs during each stage, which may or may not have an impact on how an individual develops his/her personality. "Intimacy vs Isolation" refers to the sixth stage of this model, which typically occurs between the ages of 18 and 35. During this stage, the main conflict is establishing close and significant relationships with others such as passionate love, deep friendships, and social connections.¹ Those who are in this stage may, however, also feel isolated or lonely if they are unable to develop these deep connections with other people. In the absence of these relationships, they would find

it difficult to establish a healthy sense of personal identity and self-worth, which could further result in feelings of emptiness and alienation.² It would benefit mentors to be aware of these psychosocial challenges that occur during this stage in order for them to relate more effectively with their mentees.

Establishing "Shared Identity"

According to Social Identity Approach,³ one's self-concept is associated with one's group membership. Group membership facilitates a sense of belonging and intrinsic motivation to achieve personal and group goals in life. In general, people tend to favour their own group (i.e. ingroup), and distrust others who are not part of their inner circle (i.e. outgroup). Also, people tend to be more open in sharing their struggles with their ingroup and accepting feedback from own ingroup (compared to outgroup).

Academic mentors are responsible to establish trusted and credible mentoring relationship with their mentees.⁴ When mentor and mentee have a solid relationship, this "shared identity" serves as the base for mentees to be transparent of their own academic struggles and receptive of their mentors' advice in learning and improving themselves. This is vital for academic learning, especially in the Malaysian context that is collectivistic, academic-oriented and shamed-based.

In this collectivistic, academic-oriented and shamed-based culture,⁵ many students bottle up their struggles in academics as they want to save face, and simultaneously, force themselves to live up to family expectations. This often leads to poor mental health outcomes such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression,

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insomnia and paranoia. With a strong mentoring system in an academic institution, students would perceive their respective mentors as part of the trusted ingroup. They would be more comfortable in voicing out their struggles and taking actions to overcome different academic challenges. This would facilitate a safe learning environment within that academic institution.

Setting Clear Goals and Purpose in the Mentoring Relationship

Upon establishing the mentor-mentee dyad, the setting of clear purpose and goals becomes a crucial determinant of success in the mentoring relationship. The role of a mentor may, at times, be confused with the role of a therapist, counselor, buddy, personal coach, etc. Such confusion inevitably leads to unrealistic expectations being held towards one another. Inevitably, needs are likely to be unmet and frustration or disappointments are likely to ensue within the partnership. A discussion on the purpose and goals from the outset of the mentoring relationship helps prevent such confusion and provides direction, as well as clarity on future potentials.⁶

Mentoring effectively using psychological markers

To begin with, one must comprehend Erik Erikson's underlying psychological theory of adolescence in order to understand their mentee's viewpoint, emotions, and needs. Below are some markers:

- *Self-awareness*

First and foremost, the mentor must be self-aware and conscious of their own biases and limitations while always working to further enhance their mentoring abilities.

- *Establishing Trust*

The mentor and mentee must establish a mutual trusting connection that enables the mentee to openly discuss their difficulties and concerns without worrying about being judged or subjected to punishment.⁵

- *Active Listening*

In order to fully comprehend the mentee's concerns and goals and to be able to offer personalised assistance, the mentor needs to be able to actively listen to and understand the mentee's verbal, as well as nonverbal communication. Incongruent observations shall be noted by the mentor and clarifications of the incongruence should be tactfully done.

- *Maintaining Positive Regard*

The mentor must have an open, accepting and forgiving attitude toward the mentee to foster a safe and nurturing environment that is conducive to learning and development.⁷

- *Celebrating Happiness*

As the mentor witnesses the mentee's growth, celebrate the milestones, which serves as a protective factor for the mentee to be resilient when facing academic challenges.

- *Being Flexible*

Psychologists believe in individual differences. Mentors must be adaptable in changing their methods to fit the needs and learning preferences of the mentees.

- *Providing Constructive Feedback*

Appropriately and providing timely constructive feedback, stating explicit aims and objectives, yet setting forth clear expectations.

Challenges to Mentoring

Educators and mentors alike should be aware of the many potential risks associated with mentoring. Below are some challenges:

- Mentors may unintentionally take on tasks that the students should be handling themselves if they become overly involved in their students' life. Some mentors may fail to set boundaries in their professional mentoring relationship and go above and beyond what is expected of them in their overzealousness to assist. As a result of these dynamics in their mentor-mentee relationship, students might experience learned helplessness and develop low self-esteem.
- Similarly, mentors who focus too much on providing positive reinforcement and providing overly optimistic feedback may not adequately encourage students to progress and flourish. The students' long-term development may suffer as a result of them starting to feel entitled or complacent.
- Another challenge is incompatible personalities and expectations. It can be challenging to create a positive and encouraging mentoring dynamic if both have different expectations for the partnership. Hence, clear expectations of both parties are mandatory from the beginning.
- Breakdowns in effective communication are often cited as a major cause of failure in mentoring relationships. Making progress can be difficult and frustrating if the mentor or mentee has trouble communicating adequately or if there are misconceptions.⁸
- Lack of commitment from either party leads to sluggish or non-existent progress if the mentor or mentee is not totally dedicated to the mentoring relationship.

- Power differentials and conflict of interest. Mentor may have a large amount of control over the mentee and a mentor act as the mentee's research supervisor. This may result in problems such as power abuse or exploitation. To differentiate the role, research supervision is a process in which academics guide and oversee research activities of students, while mentorship is providing guidance, advice, and encouragement to help the mentee navigate their academic journey.

Reciprocation and Establishing Mentoring Goals as Means of Overcoming Challenges

The idea that both the mentor and mentee need to experience a reciprocal giving and receiving in the mentoring relationship has often been cited in plethora of mentoring literature.⁷ In other words, in a healthy mentoring relationship, a mentor need not be solely preoccupied with what the mentee needs all the time. Instead, the mentor also needs to derive a sense of receiving or deriving something from the relationship. Along with that, is the need to recognise one's personal purpose of serving as a mentor and openly expressing one's hopes and desires in the mentoring relationship. This, need not be perceived as a self-centered or demanding act, but rather, one that sets the stage for a committed mentoring partnership to flourish. It may also prevent burnout among mentors especially when mentoring load becomes overwhelming.

Apart from that, communicating clearly on factors such as duration of the mentoring relationship, time commitment and activity spread from each party also enables mentoring goals to be accomplished in a realistic fashion. It is also worth noting that regular interaction helps in fortifying the mentoring partnership.⁷ In the context of a formal mentoring

programme in a tertiary education setting, there may, at times, already be prescribed requirements in these aspects for academic staff and students. However, no two mentor-mentee relationships are the same and reinventing the wheel would be necessary to ensure success. As such, it would be helpful for this to be articulated and negotiated with close consideration for each party's personalities and personal preferences, as well as re-evaluate as the need arises.

Overall, mentoring is a useful tool that can promote students' growth and development, but it should be approached with an informed perspective,

treaded with caution and an emphasis placed on granting students the autonomy to direct their own educational goals and personal development. By synthesising the knowledge of adolescent psychology, psychological markers on mentoring, and shared identity of mentor-mentee, and knowing the different challenges of mentoring, academic mentors can be intentional in establishing trusted and credible mentoring relationship with their students. This strong mentoring system plays an important role in creating a safe, humble and accountable learning culture within the academic institution.

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