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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Mentoring Experiences of Early Career and Senior Academics in a Multicampus University in South Africa

Yaw Owusu-Agyeman

ABSTRACT

Background/purpose – The study examines how early career academics (ECAs) and established academics perceive the importance of mentoring and how mentoring could enhance the career development of ECAs within a South African multicampus university.

Materials/methods – Two different sets of semi-structured interview questions were administered to 16 ECAs and 10 senior academics across the university's six faculties and three campuses. The data were examined using thematic analysis that involved a process of identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting the themes that emerged from the dataset.

Results – The study's results revealed that the mentoring experiences of ECAs could be enhanced by, among other things, institutional arrangements designed to address the mentoring needs of ECAs in terms of teaching, researching, researcher rating and engaged scholarship, establishment of clear communication channels that inform ECAs across the different campuses of the various professional development programs available, and the appointment and training of established academics especially at the satellite campuses to mentor ECAs.

Conclusion – To enhance the professional and personal development of ECAs, the university must establish an institutional mentoring framework that focuses on equal distribution of resources across all campuses, the adaptation of ECAs to the unique university environment, and promoting professional relationships between established academics and ECAs.

Keywords – Early career academics, mentoring, social constructivist theory, institutional structure, institutional culture, multicampus setting.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mentoring support for early career academics (ECAs) has gained attention among researchers and education providers in many higher education institutions (HEIs), primarily due to the need to equip the next generation of academics with the relevant knowledge and skills to meet society's high expectation of the profession. Although different approaches exist to support ECAs to best cope with the job demands of the academic profession, mentoring has been acknowledged as a conventional process for the career development of ECAs (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Sarabipour et al., 2021; Zentgraf, 2020). Mentoring involves the mediation of professional learning by more experienced colleagues, known as mentors (Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018; Helgevold et al., 2015; Mena et al., 2020), and who provide emotional and career support to their mentees (Mena et al., 2020; Merga & Mason, 2021). Prior studies have shown that the relationship between mentor and mentee is based upon psychosocial and instrumental support (Hackmann & Malin, 2020; Li et al., 2018), and a hierarchical connection (Helgevold et al., 2015). While an earlier study explored the academic support required by ECAs in South Africa (Subbaye & Dhunpath, 2016), very little is known about how ECAs and established academics understand the importance of mentoring and how mentoring can be applied in order to enhance the career development of ECAs. To address this knowledge gap, the current study examines the following: 1) how ECAs and established academics perceive the importance of mentoring; 2) how mentoring could enhance the career development of ECAs at the university; and, 3) the institutional structures and policies necessary to promote mentoring at the university.

The South African Human Rights Commission (2016) recommended the need for universities to be committed to attracting and retaining new academics who are well resourced within an "inclusive nurturing culture" that will enable them to work effectively. This call places greater responsibility on HEIs to support the professional development of new academics in teaching, research, and engaged scholarship through the provision of opportunities or frequent training and mentoring in different academic disciplines (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). However, the capacity of some HEIs in South Africa to attract, retain, and develop new academic staff is constrained by various reasons such as limited resource allocation (Leibowitz et al., 2015), hierarchical barriers, and the absence of clear policies on work processes (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). At the individual level, ECAs continue to grapple with the challenging demands of higher education (HE) which include heavy teaching workloads, competing job demands, and conflicting experiences around the collegiate culture of academia (Price et al., 2015; Sandi & Chubinskaya, 2020). These challenges, among others, call for an examination of the mentoring experiences of ECAs, and especially concerning how they cope with the demands of their profession as well as the support they receive from senior academics by way of mentoring.

Recent studies have shown that effective mentorship is important for mentees to attain professional success, enhance their self-belief (Schriever & Grainger, 2019), and to develop the collective identity of a teaching community of practice (Simmonds & Dicks, 2018). One of the central arguments for mentoring is its effectiveness as a process of knowledge transmission and the professional development of ECAs in the institutional setting (Richter et al., 2013). Whereas the knowledge transmission process involves socializing ECAs into the university culture and environment by senior academics, the knowledge transformation process involves the exchange of knowledge between ECAs and senior academics (Richter et al., 2013). In particular, the exchange of knowledge between mentors and mentees is

established through a dyadic (Hackmann & Malin, 2020; Schriever & Grainger, 2019) or positive mentor–mentee relationship (Hudson, 2016; Wexler, 2020), whereby mentors encourage the professional development and social integration of ECAs into the academic environment. However, studies in some HEIs, especially in South Africa, have revealed that while ECAs encounter challenges when adapting to the university environment (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021), they also face difficulty in meeting the demands of academia such as teaching, research, and engaged scholarship. Therefore, the current study aims to build upon this line of inquiry by examining the mentoring experiences of ECAs from the perspectives of established academics and ECAs within a multicampus university in South Africa. The following research questions were developed to guide the study: 1) What is the importance of mentoring to ECAs in the university?, 2) How do the mentoring experiences of ECAs enhance their career advancement at the university?, and 3) What institutional structures and policies are necessary to promote mentoring at the university?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Mentoring

Mentoring as a praxis explains the relationship between an experienced individual (mentor) and a less experienced colleague (mentee) that is characterized by trust and benevolence with the aim of enhancing the professional development and retention of the mentee (Zentgraf, 2020). To distinguish between the different structural arrangements for supporting ECAs and to show how these arrangements enhance the career development of ECAs, previous studies have categorized mentoring into formal and informal types (Bhopal, 2020; Kemmis et al., 2014; Sarabipour et al., 2021). Formal mentoring is organized through a structured program that involves assigning mentors to protégés to support them (Wanberg et al., 2003), whilst informal mentoring takes the form of an unstructured voluntary relationship (Bhopal, 2020) between an experienced and a novice teacher. Whereas formal and informal mentoring represent the conventional forms of support for novice teachers, emerging literature has revealed other forms of mentoring such as peer mentoring (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020; Sarabipour et al., 2021) and group mentoring (Mullen et al., 2020).

Beyond the types of mentoring, one of the important functions of mentoring is the transition of novice teachers to the professoriate, especially through a process of socialization and better understanding of the work demands of the profession of teaching and academia (Li et al., 2018). For instance, Muschallik and Pull (2016) showed that mentees in formal mentoring programs were more productive than their colleague researchers who did not participate in a formal mentoring program. Table 1 shows a summary of the literature on mentoring within educational institutions.

Table 1. Summary of prior studies on mentoring within educational institutions

Name of author(s)	Research focus	Units of observation	Methods	Findings
Etzkorn & Braddock (2020)	Beliefs of academics about the impact of mentoring in HEIs.	Junior & senior academics	Mixed-method approach (online survey)	Junior academics anticipate a reciprocal and engaging mentoring relationship with mentors.

Name of author(s)	Research focus	Units of observation	Methods	Findings
Hobson & Maxwell (2020)	Effectiveness of teacher mentoring.	Teachers, mentors, & other stakeholders	Mixed method	An institutional mentoring framework is important to achieving effective mentoring.
Zentgraf (2020)	Perceptions of mentors on reality of mentoring in HEIs.	Mentors	Qualitative research (interviews)	Mentors perceive emotional demands, networking experience, and training as essential features of mentoring.
Schriever & Grainger (2019)	Rationale for dyad's participating in formal mentoring.	Mentee career researcher & mentor	Reflective case study & autoethnographic approach	Motivation for dyad participation in formal mentoring includes career progression, enhanced self-belief, and increased publication output.
Osman & Hornsby (2016)	Teaching support for teaching in a research-intensive university in Africa.	ECAs	Mixed method	Although ECAs receive no direct teaching support, they are supported by colleagues at the departmental level.
Pennanen et al. (2016)	Mentoring as a tool for supporting new teachers.	New teachers	Qualitative research (interviews)	Mentoring is either enabled or constrained by cultural-discursive, social-political, and material-economic arrangements.
Desimone et al. (2014)	Characteristic differences of formal and informal mentoring.	Beginning teachers, mentors, & district education leaders	Mixed method	Informal and formal mentoring provide compensatory and complementary support to mentees.
Adcroft & Taylor (2013)	General and discipline-specific support for ECAs.	New academics & senior managers	Qualitative research (interviews)	Mentoring serves as a positive intervention in support of ECAs' career development.

The research focus of the various studies on mentoring, as shown in Table 1, include: the effectiveness of mentoring as enhanced by a supportive institutional framework (Hobson

& Maxwell, 2020), and differences in the beliefs of a dyad about mentoring (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020). In particular, the study by Desimone et al. (2014) revealed that formal and informal mentors in HEIs provide compensatory and complementary support to ECAs. On their part, Schriever and Grainger (2019) showed that the perceptions of a mentoring dyad about their motivations for participating in formal mentoring programs included career progression, enhanced self-belief, and increased publication output. Also, the commitment and experiences of mentors to any type of mentoring program are considered important to the overall success of the mentorship program. This is consistent with Zentgraf (2020), who argued that emotional demands, training sessions, and time involved in pre- and post-mentoring processes are important elements of the mentoring process that mentors need to consider when participating in such a program. However, these findings may also be influenced by geographical context and institutional structure. For instance, as shown in Table 1, in a multicampus context, Etzkorn and Braddock (2020) highlighted the importance of flexibility in the mentoring process and the need to organize training programs to equip mentors to be able to effectively support ECAs. Lastly, in relation to the theoretical underpinning of such programs, Pennanen et al. (2016) revealed the plausibility of using the social constructivist theory to examine mentoring as a practice to support new teachers.

2.2. Social constructivist theory

The plurality of mentoring theories (Kemmis et al., 2014) have given rise to various contestations surrounding mentoring as a concept and a practice. A recent study by Aarnikoivu et al. (2020) showed that mentoring is a contested space in higher education because it is understood differently based largely upon institutional and geographical traditions. While different theories have been used to examine the mentoring experiences of academics in HEIs (e.g., social exchange theory; Ensher & Murphy, 2011), the current study adopts the social constructivist theory of learning as its theoretical underpinning. Social constructivism can be explained as a theory of knowledge that describes how individuals create knowledge in a social space (Fischer, 2019). Furthermore, the social constructivist theory of learning is relevant when examining mentoring as a social practice that is either enhanced or constrained by cultural-discursive, social-political, and material-economic arrangements (Pennanen et al., 2016). Although social constructivism has its advantages, one of its weaknesses is its link to relativism that suggests that knowledge in relation to a social and cultural context is not absolute (Fischer, 2019). Notwithstanding its weaknesses, social constructivism is useful for explaining how knowledge is constructed within a social and cultural setting that is connected by social interaction (Knapp, 2019).

2.3. Study context

The history of the current study's context is similar to other historically white universities in South Africa that have evolved through several years of transformation. Originally established in 1904 as a predominantly white university, the university has grown to become a racially diverse institution with three geographically dispersed campuses. The dominant form of mentoring in the current study's context is informal mentoring (mentor and mentee). Most of the faculties have created bespoke mentoring structures to support the career development and integration of ECAs into the university. Some of the ECAs are also beneficiaries of the new Generation of Academics Program (nGAP) – a state sponsored program, and the Prestige Scholarship Program (PSP) which is a university-funded mobility initiative designed to train ECAs to the professoriate. In addition to the support provided by academic departments, the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Post

Graduate School organize workshops and training programs to support beginning lecturers to develop their teaching and research skills. However, what is currently not in place is an institution-wide structure that supports the mentoring of all ECAs through policy and practice. The current study therefore forms part of a broad institutional arrangement to develop a university-wide mentoring structure (formal and informal) to assist the professional development of all ECAs at the university. In the context of the current study, an ECA is defined as an academic who has less than 5 years of work experience as a professional lecturer and who continues to develop themself in the academe. Bosanquet et al. (2017) argued that length of employment is often used to categorize early career and this ranges from 5 to 7 years, although this could vary under certain circumstances.

3. METHODOLOGY

To answer the study's research questions, a semi-structured interview was used to gather data from ECAs and senior academics who were sampled from the university. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand events in their natural setting with a focus on the perspectives and experiences of individuals that cannot be explained using objective measurements (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Kyngäs et al., 2020).

3.1. Participants

The total staff population of the university is 2,521, based at three different campuses in the province. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to gather data from the study's participants, which consisted of 18 males and eight females. The participant distribution based on faculty was as follows: Humanities ($n = 9$); Education ($n = 6$); Natural and Agricultural Sciences ($n = 4$); Economic and Management Sciences ($n = 4$); Health Sciences ($n = 2$); and Theology and Religion ($n = 1$). The geographical and discipline diversity of the participants served to provide a valuable set of data with potentially differing opinions regarding the perceptions of lecturers on student engagement issues. Participants retained anonymity through allocating each a pseudonym.

3.2. Procedures

Formal invitations were issued via email to all prospective participants across all three campuses and seven faculties of the university. The participants who consented to participate in the study were then contacted and dates for their interviews subsequently scheduled. The interviews were conducted between July and October 2019 at the university's three campuses. Participants were each briefed about the purpose of the study and then requested to sign a consent form prior to their interview. The participants were informed about the potential benefits and risks of the study, as well as their right to withdraw from the interview if they chose to do so. The duration of the interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, and the interviews were conducted in a natural setting with minimal noise to prevent distraction. Two sets of semi-structured interview schedules were used to gather data from the participants regarding their mentoring experiences in the study context. In particular, the semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to probe and use follow-up questions (e.g., Walker & Gleaves, 2016) where appropriate and warranted.

So as to ensure the confidentiality of the information provided by the study's participants, a three-part process was followed. First, each participant was informed of the procedures adopted to safely process and store the study's data. This process included storing the electronic data on a password-protected computer, with hard copies of the transcripts locked in a safe for a period of 5 years. Second, the participants were informed

not to provide any personal identifiers that could easily link them to the data. Lastly, only the interviewer and interviewee were present at the interview venue, and the audio-recording device was placed clearly in sight of the interviewee. The current study was approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee in fulfillment of the requirements for conducting research at the university. In line with the rules of ethical consideration, the rationale of the study, its potential risks and benefits, as well as the right of participants to withdraw from the interview if they felt they could not continue for personal reasons was explained to each participant.

3.3. Data analysis

The data were examined using thematic analysis. The process involved the development of codes to categories and themes. The rationale for thematic analysis is to provide details about the characteristics of a dataset and the intended explanation of the depth of a phenomenon (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). One advantage of thematic analysis is its theoretical freedom and flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing researchers to examine complex and rich datasets (Neuendorf, 2019). In the current study, the first step involved exploring the collected data for important phrases and sentences from the ECAs and senior academics that addressed the importance of mentoring to ECAs, institutional arrangements to enhance mentoring, and how mentoring enhances the professional development of ECAs. In order to determine those codes that best represent the views of the two participant categories, codes that appeared a minimum of 10 times were highlighted. Some examples of the codes that emerged were; "I have experienced informal mentoring," "I have experienced formal mentoring," "There is a need for mentoring," "Mentoring is built upon relationships between ECAs and senior academics," and "Lack of a pool of established academics."

The second step involved collating the emerged codes into categories. For example, "I have experienced informal mentoring" and "I have experienced formal mentoring" were collapsed into "ECAs mentoring experiences." The third step involved identifying the data's themes based on the patterns developed from the codes and categories of the two datasets. Examples of the themes that emerged are "institutional structure, culture and policies" and "challenges to effective mentoring of ECAs." Prior research has shown that the process of drawing interpretations from analyzed data is essential in order to arrive at conclusions in research studies that employ thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) using codes, categories, and themes. Therefore, by adopting the thematic framework and probing the two datasets, repeated patterns of meanings from the texts that emerged were finally able to be grouped and analyzed according to the emerged themes.

Furthermore, the detailed process of analyzing the dataset was conducted so as to ensure trustworthiness and methodological thoroughness of the research design. Trustworthiness in qualitative research has been explained as the methodical thoroughness of the research design, the credibility of the researcher, the authenticity of the findings, and how applicable the research methods are considered in terms of future research (Johnson & Parry, 2015; Rose & Johnson, 2020). In a recent study, Pratt et al. (2020) cautiously argued that the extent to which others can evaluate the honesty of a researcher according to the processes used in conducting their research clearly defines trustworthiness, rather than any focus on the replicability of the research.

4. RESULTS

Five themes were developed from the data analyzed: the importance of mentoring to ECAs; formal and informal mentoring experiences of ECAs; mentoring features that enhance the professional knowledge and skills of ECAs; institutional mentoring structure, culture, and policies; and, challenges to the effective mentoring of ECAs.

Senior academics

The importance of mentoring to ECAs

The establishment of an institutional mentoring framework can only be achieved when providers of education and academic leaders explore and understand the importance of mentoring to ECAs. In the study, the senior academics shared their opinion on the importance of mentoring to the professional development of ECAs at the university. Friedrich, who is a departmental head at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, explained that mentoring should first be understood as a process that involves both minute and in-depth activities applied within the academic setting.

> I think mentoring begins with the minute detail at work in a department – from helping a younger colleague with academic research to applying for travel authorization and managing a research entity. The deeper level involves dealing with the emotional elements of ECAs, and trying to provide them with the support they need... [Friedrich]

The views of Friedrich shows how some academics perceive mentoring as a process that is aimed at supporting the career development of ECAs, their emotional well-being, and their adjustment to university life. He further explained that mentoring is considered important for ECAs in order that they can understand the strategic plans of the university and the institutional structure:

> There is a need for mentoring ECAs not just in terms of their academic trajectory, but also for them to climb up through the ranks and to enhance their research profile. It also involves helping ECAs to relate well with their colleagues, and to understand the strategic plans of the university and the institutional structure. [Friedrich]

In the absence of formal mentoring systems, some departments had resorted to the use of institutional support services to help ECAs adapt to the university environment and to develop their teaching and research skills. For instance, Philani, an associate professor at the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences explained how some professional service departments of the university provide support to ECAs:

> Although we do not have a formal mentoring structure as a faculty, we encourage ECAs to receive training at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). This involves whiteboard training and other teaching and learning methodologies that they need to acquire. [Philani]

The feedback from the participants showed that mentoring encompasses different activities arranged so as to support ECAs in adjusting to the university work environment, to understand the institutional structure and culture of the university, and to enhance their

personal development and well-being. This included services provided by professional service departments such as the CTL. Prior research has shown that effective mentorship includes a process of engagement with ECAs through advising on career development, networking opportunities, applying for research funding, and accessing career development opportunities (Broughton et al., 2019) that may be provided by individuals, groups, or departments.

Mentoring features that enhance the professional knowledge and skills of ECAs

The study participants explained how mentoring could enhance the professional knowledge and skills of ECAs at the university. Research support is one of the features of mentoring that can enhance the professional knowledge and skills of ECAs (Mgaiwa & Kapinga, 2021). Arno, a professor at the Faculty of Humanities, explained that, *"Support for beginning lecturers should start with local seminars and local workshops where you encourage them to present their research ideas and so on."* Closely linked to research support is teaching and learning support, which is considered important to the professional practices of ECAs. Jabulani explained the challenges that some senior academics face in supporting ECAs; *"Sometimes it might be very difficult for senior academics to attend a teaching session of an ECA because of other commitments."* In order to address the knowledge and skills gaps that ECAs face in the area of teaching and learning, Teboho, a professor at the Faculty of Humanities, emphasized the establishment of professional certificates for ECAs at the university:

> The acquisition of a professional certificate in education for new lecturers is important. The purpose of the certificate is to teach lecturers how they can conduct their lectures and to help them to become good lecturers in terms of course delivery. [Teboho]

However, Samuel stressed the need for more support from senior academics:

> It would be important to assist ECAs to get the initial NRF rating through research support. There should be a forum where ECAs would be able to speak with senior academics. Such meetings will enable senior academics to understand the challenges ECAs face in their work. [Samuel]

The narratives of the participants show that research support, especially through seminars, professional development programs that lead to certificates being awarded, supporting ECAs to work towards obtaining NRF researcher rating, and teaching support, can enhance the career development and adaptation of ECAs at the university. Another finding concerned teaching and learning is that the university may rely upon a specialized unit at the university to provide training and certificates to ECAs.

Institutional mentoring structure, culture, and policies

Institutional structure, culture, and policies are important in providing mentorship support for ECAs. Most participants in the study were of the opinion that institutional mentoring structures represent an important way to address gaps in the work-life adaptation of ECAs and their career development. This finding is demonstrated in the following quote:

> Mentoring should be open to all ECAs and not just for those that are supported in their career development through special programs such as the PSP. The departments should also develop internal systems to support the mentoring of new lecturers. [Teboho]

The feedback from Teboho revealed that while the university has formal mentoring arrangements for ECAs by way of nGAP and the PSP, it is important for these formal mentoring arrangements to be extended to all ECAs rather than just a select few. While financial constraints may be the reasoning behind selecting limited numbers of ECAs to benefit from the institutional and national mentoring arrangements, there is a recognized need for the university to explore other forms of mentoring for ECAs. On his part, Jabulani, from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, illustrated how the faculty currently support ECAs to advance their careers through informal mentoring:

> In the area of research, we encourage academics to source funding from different agencies. This is an example of the informal mentoring process in place at our department. We employed a technician who through hard work has now graduated with a Ph.D., and who recently secured external (Tutukah) funding to continue his research. [Jabulani]

Lerato, from the Faculty of Education, underscored the importance of mentoring to ECAs, and especially through the formation of interest groups:

> We always have two or three people working in a research area. These research interest groups support ECAs through an informal mentoring arrangement. Additionally, we have a standing item on our departmental agenda which is research support. [Lerato]

The views of Lerato were corroborated by Nicole who highlighted the importance of research interest groups to ECAs.

> Most of the interest groups are discipline specific [at the departmental level]. I have found that to be one of the ways that academics can be introduced to the research activities of the department. However, there are no formal opportunities for the sharing of teaching and learning ideas, approaches, or experiences. [Nicole]

The feedback from the participants showed that formal institutional structures are necessary to promote effective mentoring experiences for ECAs. This view is in agreement with prior studies that have suggested mentoring can be enhanced through a supportive institutional framework (Gupta, 2021; Hobson & Maxwell, 2020) that includes both formal and informal arrangements. In the absence of formal institutional mentoring, departments could rely on informal mentoring as a means of supporting ECAs to adjust to the university work environment and to develop their careers.

Challenges to effective mentoring of ECAs

Although mentoring has been highlighted as being very important to ECAs, especially concerning their adaptation to university life and the development of their professional

careers, some participants explained various different issues that can affect its implementation. For instance, Lethabo highlighted high teaching and student supervision workloads as examples of the challenges faced by ECAs, stating that; *"Typically, in our department, younger staff would very easily become overwhelmed by the workload of teaching and supervision duties. To be honest, you really need to be smart to align that with your research work."* On his part, Arno touched on the complexities of the multicampus setting and the challenges that ECAs face concerning mentoring:

> Here at QwaQwa, mentoring is limited just because we have quite a young cohort of academics. Within our ranks, there is not much opportunity for mentoring. So, you are required to seek mentors from either Bloemfontein or other institutions. [Arno]

The views of Arno were corroborated by Brandon at the Bloemfontein campus, who explained that the lack of established academics especially at the rank of professor to mentor ECAs was a challenge currently faced by some departments of the university:

> I have to say that the university faces a bit of a challenge in terms of mentoring. We are one of the few departments in this faculty where there are two professors. However, I think we have done our best as a department by developing mentoring relationships for some lecturers. [Brandon]

Kabelo, who is a professor at the Faculty of Humanities, explained how a high teaching workload together with research activities can limit the involvement of some established academics in the mentoring of ECAs, stating that; *"Our challenge is that we have a lot of teaching to do as lecturers. I think there should be a balance between the teaching load and the research support we are required to provide."* However, he also added that ECAs should be responsible for developing their career through intrinsic drive; *"If you want to grow your career, it should be through your own personal effort and intrinsic drive...of course along with support from the department"* [Kabelo]. While this assertion is consistent with the arguments made in previous research which suggest that ECAs should take responsibility for developing their own careers (Sarabipour et al., 2021), a good relationship between ECAs and established academics is seen as essential for ECAs to understand how to develop their careers effectively. This view was echoed by Lerato, who indicated that mentoring relationships must be developed organically between mentors and mentees:

> For mentoring to really work and to be meaningful, it is dependent on the relationship between two people...and remember, you cannot force that relationship. It has to happen organically. It involves as an organic relationship between a senior academic and a new academic and that should not be coercive. [Lerato]

The narratives from the participants show that challenges to effective mentoring in the university include the complexities of the multicampus setting and the seeming low numbers of established academics in some departments to mentor ECAs, the difficulty some established academics face in making time to mentor ECAs, and the lack of "organic" relationships between academics. However, some established academics indicated that they

expected ECAs to take responsibility for their own career development, and to take the initiative to approach other academics for support when needed.

Early career academics

Formal and informal mentoring experiences of ECAs

Mentoring for ECAs is especially important for their integration into university life, as well as to their future career advancement. The ECAs shared their experiences of formal and informal mentoring, and how they perceived mentoring as important to their career development. Jeso noted that although mentoring is considered important, ECAs in his department receive neither formal nor informal mentoring support:

> There is no structure that supports formal or informal mentoring where senior professors or senior lecturers can engage with the junior lecturers to provide that kind of mentoring support in my department. People do not want to share their knowledge with others…they just say I struggled so you should struggle as well. [Jeso]

The views Jeso differed somewhat from those shared by Bryan who is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education and who recounted the benefits he had received by way of informal mentoring from other academics, *"I do not have a formal mentor, but in terms of informal mentoring, I have received support from other academics."* From his own personal experience, Bryan identified affective support as being very important to the mentoring experiences of ECAs:

> I think that in terms of emotional support, a lot will have to be improved. I do not think that it has really been very effective working in a very solitary place like this, you know. I think that the sense of community could be improved. [Bryan]

The narrative of Bryan highlights the importance of mentoring to the development of the personal characteristics of ECAs which have been afforded very little attention in much of the mentoring literature (Broughton et al., 2019). As explained by Bryan, emotional support represents one of the most important elements of support that ECAs require from established academics. Contrasting with the views of Bryan and Jeso, Dova who is a beneficiary of formal mentoring in her department, touched upon how mentoring had enabled her to adapt to the university environment and also in receiving support when challenges were encountered:

> Having someone to look up to is very important, because sometimes you come across challenges on campus that you do not know how to deal with. So, if we have someone who is there to assist us to navigate these waters and advise us, it becomes much easier for us to cope. [Dova]

The views of Dova further revealed the dissimilarities in the mentoring experiences of ECAs in the university. Clearly, when ECAs are provided with mentoring support, either formal or informal, they more easily adapt to the university environment and also contact their experienced colleagues for assistance when they face challenges.

Mentoring features that enhance the professional knowledge and skills of ECAs

The ECAs shared their views on how mentoring could enhance their professional knowledge and skills at the university. For instance, Katleho emphasized the importance of mentoring for ECAs to enhance their research skills, which includes being able to apply for research funding, by stating that *"A research fund should be set aside for ECAs to help us start our research career and to cover the cost of conferences and other activities. We could be assigned mentors to help us through the application and writing process."* While prior research has revealed that mentors could support ECAs through co-authoring and academic writing (Merga & Mason, 2021), the development of ECA's knowledge and skills in applying for research funding has become very important in recent times. Closely linked to research funding is the NRF rating for researchers in South Africa. This was echoed in the narrative of Nathan, who stated that, *"I have publications and some community engagement programs. I was able to source funding from NRF. What I need to do now is to apply for the NRF rating."* The narrative from Nathan revealed that while ECAs may expect some form of support from established academics concerning research and applying for research funding, they do not expect the same support when it comes to applying for NRF funding. On her part. Merinda suggested that *"there should be continuous workshops for new academics who are employed by the university."* She further recommended that information for new academics should be made readily available to them when they are appointed, *"It would be very helpful to have like a resource pack that also contains all the policies and work procedures."* Merinda's views show that information dissemination is an important feature in the adaptation and career development of ECAs. This is consistent with prior research that has revealed that information dissemination and effective communication are essential in the mentoring of ECAs (Gupta, 2021).

Institutional mentoring structure, culture, and policies

Institutional support structures, cultures, and polices are important to the promotion of mentoring in HEIs. The study's participants explained how existing institutional structures, cultures, and policies on mentoring had an influence over their career development. Dingani explained what he perceives as the cultural challenges associated with the mentoring of ECAs at the university.

> The institutional culture of the university in terms of mentoring is not as cohesive as it should be or as we would like to make it. Therefore, I think that we have a lot of work to do by way of creating an institutional culture that is receptive to all lecturers and to ensure ECAs develop a sense of belonging. [Dingani]

The feedback from Dingani demonstrated the inseparability of institutional culture, ECAs sense of belonging, and the mentoring support required by ECAs. When ECAs are unable to see themselves as part of the university community, it negatively affects their sense of belonging and their adjustment to the university environment. On her part, Zoe, a lecturer at the South Campus shared her opinion on how the complexities of a multicampus setting can affect the development of ECAs, especially in terms of the lack of support structures, saying, *"It might have been better if there was mentorship at the South Campus. There is no mentoring relationship with other senior academics at the other campuses either."* However, another participant, from the Faculty of Humanities, suggested an institutional-level approach to developing a mentoring structure rather than a departmental or faculty-based approach:

> Well, I do not think that support for ECAs must be done solely at the departmental level. If mentoring is left to the departments, they will always give the impression that mentoring is happening, while it may not be in reality. The university could have its own initiatives that aim to better support ECAs. [Lefa]

The narratives of the study's participants have shown that institutional culture and structure have an influence over the mentoring experiences of ECAs at the university. The views of the ECAs pointed to a lack of institutional structure that promotes mentoring, and how that could adversely affect the career development of ECAs, their adaptation to the university, and their sense of belonging as members of the university community.

5. DISCUSSION

While mentoring as a praxis and theory has been explored in different scholarly studies (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020; Zentgraf, 2020), the current study has shown that the participants perceive mentoring to be important to the career development and social adjustment of ECAs at the university. The majority of established academics interviewed understood the importance of mentoring that include activities that are institutionally arranged to support ECAs to adjust to their work environment, understand the institutional structure and culture, and enhance their personal development and emotional well-being. Although the participants in the study provided different accounts of their experiences with mentoring, analysis of the interview data revealed that the mentoring experiences of ECAs can be enhanced through the following: 1) the development of organic relationships between established academics and ECAs; 2) the establishment of formal and informal institutional mentoring arrangements that focus on the adaptation of ECAs to the university environment and the personal development of ECAs that includes their emotional well-being; 3) identifying and addressing the core developmental needs of ECAs, which in the current context includes teaching, research, researcher rating, and engaged scholarship; 4) communicating institution-wide programs on professional development to ECAs; and, 5) training established academics to support the mentoring of ECAs.

Upon close examination of the study's results, it is revealed that the structure of the current study context (a multicampus university) provides additional dimensions as to how the availability or lack of resources by way of established academics and mentoring structures could either enhance or constrain the professional development of ECAs. As a result, two major reasons were identified as contributing factors to the seemingly slow adoption of mentoring: first, is the lack of established academics in some departments to offer mentoring to ECAs; and second, the reliance of some departments on the services of other professional departments such as the CTL to provide assistance to ECAs, especially in relation to their teaching responsibilities. However, these challenges could be minimized if academic departments were to develop ECA mentoring programs, whilst also making use of the services provided by departments such as the CTL to support the professional development of ECAs. Clearly, the lack of any institution-wide mentoring framework could conceivably constrain the career development of ECAs at the university. In a recent study undertaken at a university in Tanzania, it was revealed that the absence of mentoring arrangements and policies directly affected the professional development of the university's ECAs (Mgaiwa & Kapinga, 2021). In order to address these mentoring gaps, there have been

calls made for a comprehensive and coherent mentoring superstructure (Hobson & Maxwell, 2020) or supportive institutional framework (Gupta, 2021) that creates conducive conditions for effective mentoring substructures. Therefore, if adequately provided, the mentoring framework could help ECAs to adjust quicker to the university environment, and thereby to develop their careers with less challenges.

Notwithstanding the lack of institutional structures and arrangements to support the career development of ECAs, the role of senior academics in providing discipline-specific mentoring support was highlighted in the study. As shown from the results, through the promotion of interest groups, allocation of research funds for ECAs, support in the area of NRF researcher ratings, and through the provision of emotional support, senior academics could assist ECAs to better adjust to the university environment and to develop their careers. To enhance mentoring at the university, there is a need for good relationships to be developed between ECAs and senior academics. For instance the promotion of interest groups, providing emotional support, and joint research projects are dependent on the quality of relationships developed between senior academics and ECAs. The narrative of one of the study's participants was that, *"mentoring is an organic relationship between a senior academic and a new academic that is not coercive."* This narrative is consistent with the views of prior research in which it has been argued that mentoring involves a dyadic relationship between experienced individuals and their protégés for the purposes of career guidance (Daniel et al., 2019; Schriever & Grainger, 2019).

When ECAs are provided with quality mentoring support, they more easily adjust to the university environment and learn about the academic culture of the university from senior academics. Conversely, when ECAs do not receive mentoring support from senior academics, especially on issues concerning academic culture and practice, it could result in slowing the pace of the ECA's successful integration into the university environment. In a previous study, ECA's were shown to be mostly unfamiliar with the culture of academia such that, if made explicit by a mentor, it could help them to acclimatize better to their roles and responsibilities (Subbaye & Dhunpath, 2016), and therefore to the culture of the university as academics. Mentoring could help ECAs to understand the culture of the university, enhance their sense of belonging and social connectedness, and to foster their mutual growth (Simmonds & Dicks, 2018). Conversely, a lack of mentoring support for ECAs can lead potentially to their leaving the university (Lejonberg & Tiplic, 2016).

Lastly the dissimilarities in the mentoring experiences of ECAs (both formal and informal) at the university showed that different departments each have their own unique structures and systems for the provision of mentoring support for their ECAs. These differences are, to a large extent, dependent on the subculture of the departments, the commitment of the departmental heads to drive forwards the mentoring agenda, especially though departmental meetings, and the availability of established academics to mentor ECAs across the university's three campuses.

Study implications for practice

The findings of the current study point to four implications for practice. First, the establishment of an institutional mentoring structure, policy, and programs in the study context could enhance the mentoring experiences of both the university's ECAs and senior academics. While competitive mentoring programs such as the PSP and nGAP are laudable and can be said to enhance the acceleration of ECAs to professorial ranks, the opportunities are limited to but a few ECAs. Therefore, an institutional effort that aims at integrating

formal and informal mentoring practices on a larger and wider scale is necessary for the career development of all ECAs. In particular, the establishment of an institutional mentoring structure with a coordinating unit that can manage the mentoring of ECAs at the university is also seen as important to enhance the smooth implementation of a formal ECA mentoring process.

Other more auxiliary institutional arrangements that may be considered include workshops, training programs, seminars, and conferences that aim to build upon the research and teaching capacity of the university's ECAs. Another important institutional arrangement would be the establishment of professional development programs that are aimed at supporting ECAs to acquire professional teaching certificates as well as relevant research skills. Consistencies between the findings of the current study and previous research (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Sandi & Chubinskaya, 2020) further substantiates the argument that an institutional structure that supports mentoring could develop the necessary skills of ECAs to become independent researchers, to develop funded research careers, and to attain promotion through the ranks within the university.

Second, the lack of equal distribution of resources, which includes the lack of senior academics, represent some of the contextual features that affect the mentoring of ECAs at the university. It is therefore considered important for the university, and for other universities with a multicampus setting, to explore strategies that ensure equal distribution of resources as well as the training of established academics to better support ECAs through mentoring. This includes assigning established academics to mentor ECAs at all campuses of the university. Also, ECAs who wish to be mentored by their former doctoral supervisors should be encouraged to do so through their departments.

Third, information regarding mentoring practices should be prioritized and properly disseminated in order to ensure that all ECAs receive up-to-date and useful information on the availability of mentoring services. Clearly, the geographically dispersed setting of the university presents additional challenges with respect to the effective dissemination of information to ECAs concerning the available career development opportunities. This gap could be addressed through a more community-based approach whereby all ECAs are first profiled and then equipped with information regarding the professional development opportunities available at the university.

Lastly, there should be opportunities made available for knowledge sharing between both established academics and ECAs, especially through departmental meetings, seminars, training programs, and conferences. This may be achieved through a conscious attempt to change the culture where it is not deemed conducive to the enhancement of knowledge sharing amongst members of the professional community, and the arrangement of activities that promote interaction between ECAs and established academics.

Limitation and future research

The findings of the current study should be discussed in relation to three main limitations. First, the current study examined the mentoring experiences of participants based on only two forms of mentoring – formal and informal. Future studies could explore other mentoring arrangements such as peer mentoring and group mentoring, and to assess how these other mentoring arrangements could be applied in order to enhance the career development of ECAs. Secondly, the current study's setting, whilst similar to other universities in South Africa, also has its own unique contextual features. Therefore, some findings from this study may not be relatable to the experiences of academics at other

universities. Similar research could be conducted at universities with different structures. Thirdly, there is a limitation of generalizing the needs of ECAs across all disciplines. The current study was applied as an institution-wide research that sought to understand the current perceptions and experiences of academics about mentoring. Future research could examine the differences in the mentoring needs of ECAs in different disciplines within the university setting.

6. CONCLUSION

The five themes that emerged from the study's analysis were: the importance of mentoring to ECAs; formal and informal mentoring experiences of ECAs; mentoring features that enhance the professional knowledge and skills of ECAs; institutional mentoring structure, culture, and policies; and, challenges to the effective mentoring of ECAs. These five interrelated themes help to explain how the mentoring experiences of ECAs could be enhanced through institutional mentoring structure, culture, and policies.

First, the narrative of the majority of established academics showed mentoring to be an important tool if used to support the career development and social integration of ECAs at the university. Furthermore, they explained that the importance of institutional mentoring arrangement should include the provision of support to ECAs in helping them adjust to their work environment, assisting them in understanding the institutional structure and culture, and supporting the professional development of the next generation of academics.

Second, the study revealed that mentoring could enhance the career advancement of ECAs at the university through the following: 1) the development of organic relationships between established academics and ECAs that enhances the professional and personal experiences of ECAs; 2) the establishment of institutional formal and informal mentoring arrangements that focus on the career and personal development of ECAs, including their emotional well-being; 3) identifying and addressing the core and unique developmental needs of ECAs in terms of their teaching, research, researcher rating, and engaged scholarship; 4) establishing a clear communication channel that informs all ECAs across the different campuses of the university about the various professional development programs available to ECAs; and, 5) the appointment and training of more established academics, especially at the satellite campuses, in order to more effectively provide mentorship to ECAs.

Finally, the study revealed that the absence of institutional structures and policies that support mentoring and the unequal distribution of resources, including the lack of senior academics to mentor ECAs in satellite campuses, continues to negatively affect the social integration and mentoring of ECAs at the university. The study argues that there is a clear need for the university, along with other universities with a similar (multicampus) structure, to address the challenges that ECAs face, especially in relation to their social adjustment and career development, by placing additional focus on improving the necessary policies, structures, and practices that will allow for the provision of equal mentoring and career development support to all ECAs across the different campuses of the university.

DECLARATIONS

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Conflicts of interest The author declares no conflict of interest.

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