Reflections from the Field

The mentoring experiences of professional staff in higher education: evidence from a South African university

Yaw Owusu-Agyeman ✉ (Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning, University of the Free State, South Africa)

Abstract

This study examines how the mentoring experiences of professional staff in a South African university enhance their social integration and professional development. Drawing on social constructivist theory, semi-structured interview were used to gather insights from 41 professional staff. The results reveal that professional staff receive practical training, familiarise themselves with their new job roles, build social networks and, learn the culture of the university when they are mentored. Conversely, professional staff have to develop their own perceptions about the institution's culture and adopt a painstaking approach to understanding work procedures and policies in the absence of mentoring.

Keywords

Mentoring, professional staff, social constructivism, professional community, higher education

Introduction

The higher education (HE) sector requires highly skilled professional staff that can contribute to the attainment of the goals of higher education institutions (HEIs). One of the widely known tools that is used to support new and early career employees to adjust to the workplace environment and enhance their career development, is mentoring (Janssen et al., 2018; Mangion-Thornley, 2021). Mentoring explains the relationship between an experienced individual (mentor) and a less experienced person (mentee) that is characterised by trust and benevolence with the aim of enhancing the professional development and retention of mentees (Zentgraf, 2020). By providing a more nuanced explanation to the concept, Menges (2016, p.98) argues that mentoring is, "the provision of career and psychosocial support by an experienced mentor to a relatively less experienced protégé." Mentoring relationships in the 21st-century have evolved from the singular and hierarchical apprenticeship model to a more diverse and structured system that incorporates specialist ideas from different sources (Zellers et al., 2008). A recent study has revealed that

mentors serve as advisors, instructors, employers, and agents of socialisation (Daniel et al., 2019) in universities. Furthermore, increased accountability, market-based models, work conditions and demands from students and other stakeholders, and corporate-style managerial practices in universities (Berg et al., 2016, Oberhauser & Caretta, 2019) have necessitated the use of mentoring as a tool to support the adjustment of professional staff and their career development.

Professional staff in the HE sector represents a body of different professional communities that provide services support to students, teachers and other members of the university community to enhance teaching and learning and other work activities (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2022). Within a professional community, members depend on distinct instruments, institutional arrangements, strategies, visions and procedures to lead, and do so by generating and sharing knowledge among themselves (Nerland & Hasu, 2021). Therefore, through interaction and the sharing of knowledge among professionals, an expert culture emerges within the professional community. A professional community consist of shared norms and values, in the HE sector this means the professional has a collective focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatised practice (through peer support and mentorship) and reflective dialogue (Banerjee et al., 2017). When new professional staff join the university, they become members of the professional community who generate and share knowledge about their work processes and output. Therefore, new and early career professional staff who are employed must be integrated into the university and supported to learn the shared norms, values, skills and common cultural practices that are observed and practice by members of the professional community.

Prior research (Holmes, 2020) from the United Kingdom suggests that while the HE sector has experienced an increase in specialised support roles, career development and continuous professional development programmes that include mentoring for these professional staff have not been prioritised. A similar study conducted in Canada revealed that weak mentorship culture, a lack of institutional resources and support constrain effective mentoring for professional service staff (Sheridan et al., 2015). Focusing on how mentoring facilitates learning in a study conducted in South Africa and Malawi, Jordaan and colleagues (2018) argues that mentoring can be needs-driven, built on relationships and created by using appropriate mentor-mentee matches. Although academic engagement in HEIs comprise of teaching, research, and engaged scholarship (Fowler, 2017), the support provided by professional staff enhance the teaching and learning processes as well as other academic and non-academic activities and experiences. The services provided by professional staff in HEIs include learning technology support, library services, general administration support and laboratory support.

While scholarly studies on mentoring in HE abound with theories and practices that support early career academics and new academics, there is a paucity of research on how mentoring can enhance the integration and career advancement of professional staff in HEIs. In order to address the knowledge and practical gaps in the mentoring support provided to professional staff in a university setting in South Africa, this study was underpinned by three main research objectives: 1) to examine the perceptions and experiences of professional staff about the mentoring support they either provide or receive from their colleagues; 2) to investigate how mentoring support enhance the career advancement of professional staff and; 3) to examine how career context (institutional structure and culture) enhance the mentoring process and career advancement of professional staff.

Consequently, the study was guided by three research questions (RQ): RQ1) What are the current professional staff perceptions and experiences of the mentoring support they either provide or receive from their colleagues; RQ2) how can mentoring support/enhance the career advancement of professional staff and; RQ3) how can career context (institutional structure and culture) provide a setting that enhances the mentoring experiences and career advancement of professional staff.

The context of mentoring

The context of mentoring consists of formal and informal relationships (Bhopal, 2020; Zentgraf, 2020), institutional mentoring architectures (Hobson and Maxwell 2020), mentoring policy and training programme for mentors (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020), and network relations (Bhopal, 2020). Concerning formal mentoring relationships, institutions pair protégés with more experienced and knowledgeable mentors who are tasked to provide career and psychosocial support to the protégé to enhance their career and personal development (Bhopal, 2020; Menges, 2016; Zentgraf, 2020). In contrast, informal mentoring relationships are often developed spontaneously without the involvement of an institution and are often arranged based on mutual identification, interpersonal comfort, and sympathy (Menges, 2016). The difference between formal and informal mentoring relationships is that formal mentoring relationships are introduced through a structured program by an institution that involves assigning mentors to protégés who facilitate and support the relationship within the assigned dyad (Wanberg et al., 2003). However, Desimone and colleagues (2014) show that informal and formal mentoring in educational institutions sometimes serve similar functions but often provide compensatory and complementary support. Importantly, mentoring provides professional networking opportunities among members of a professional community and those outside the community. This further reveals the significance of mentoring as a tool for enhancing socialisation, transformation of the identity of professional staff and their career development.

The role of a mentor in the mentoring process

The role of a mentor is to serve as a role model and to provide emotional and career support to a mentee (Mena et al. 2020). Referring to the mentoring role as involving matriarchal and patriarchal functions, Orland-Barak (2014) explains that the importance of the mentors' role is to create a welcoming environment for mentees. While the patriarchal function of mentors consists of features such as providing guidance and instruction to mentees, the matriarchal function emphasises emotional support, nurturing and personal caring (Orland-Barak, 2014). In the context of universities, the mentoring support professional staff receive in relation to their adjustment and professional advancement is necessary to enhance good service delivery for students, to promote quality learning experiences. Similarly, when academic staff receive quality services from professional staff, their work output is enhanced while they contribute to the attainment of institutional goals. For instance, Manuel and Poorsattar (2021) show that effective mentorship is not only important for the attainment of the professional success of mentees but also, it enhances their career advancement, job performance, self-confidence and the development of their sense of community and fulfilment. Also, mentoring enhances the development and retention of high potential talent (Hegstad & Wentling, 2004), engenders effective communication among employees, increases employees' sense of commitment and loyalty, and can lead to reduced employee turnover (Ensher & Murphy, 2011).

Although mainstream literature on mentoring has highlighted some positive outcomes, mentoring can lead to negative outcomes, such as overdependence and resentment (Warhurst & Black, 2019). For instance, prior studies has shown that there could be some negative mentoring experiences, such as betrayal of trust, damaging mentors' reputation, disrespecting mentors and ingratitude on the part of protégés (Eby & Allen, 2002). Some protégés on the other hand could also face some negative experiences such as bullying, jealousy and abuse (Eby et al., 2008). Other formulations have highlighted challenges, such as patriarchal systems of power, hierarchy, and exclusion that preserve neoliberalist assumptions of individualism and exceptionalism in the mentoring structures of universities and selection of mentors for mentees (Goerisch et al., 2019). While the institutional transformation project of the current study context highlights the importance of providing support to all categories of new staff, it further seeks to erase previous notions of exclusion especially amongst black staff and to provide a structure that creates a sense of belonging to all staff (Knight, 2018).

Mentoring and the Social constructivist approach

Using social constructivism as the theoretical underpinning, this study examines how professional staff in a university setting create knowledge and make social meaning of their environment concerning how mentoring supports their integration into the university as well as their career development. As an interpretive approach to understanding social phenomena, social constructivism explains how knowledge is created in the social world (Fischer, 2019; Shapiro, 2020). Beyond the ontological dimension, social constructivism is an epistemological theory that is underpinned by sociological and historical study of social inquiry (Fischer, 2019). Social constructivism has been critiqued on the basis that it is grounded on relativism (Fischer, 2019) which assumes that knowledge and truth exist in relation to historical context, institutional structure and culture that are not absolute. Notwithstanding the weaknesses of social constructivism, this study focuses on the strength of this theory to explain perceptions, in this case how professional staff perceive mentoring as an important tool that supports their integration into the university and their career development. The definition and conceptualisation of mentoring has evolved to include features such as collaborative mentoring, co-mentoring, mutual mentoring, peer collaboration, dialogical mentoring and reciprocal mentoring (Pennanen et al., 2016). These forms of mentoring could help new staff to integrate into the university and to develop their careers

Social constructivism is relevant for examining how mentoring as a social practice is influenced by language, social relationships and arrangements (Kemmis et al., 2014; Pennanen et al., 2016). First, language informs the cultural-discursive arrangements that defines mentoring practices among professional staff in universities. For example, in a cross-cultural mentoring dyad, members would (a) possess diverse perspectives regarding social issues and interactions; (b) be compelled to navigate unique communicational challenges based on cultural dissimilarity; and (c) express and experience unrelated expectations regarding their respective roles (Daniel et al., 2019). Second, social relationships between professional staff in HEIs is enhanced by interaction, team activities and collaboration. Therefore, while newly employed professional staff interact with their senior colleagues and peers, they learn the professional language and culture of the new environment (Kemmis et al., 2014). Thirdly, mentoring as a social arrangement explains the material-economic links that exist in the university setting. The material-economic connections consist of resources that are important to perform job task and time allocated to the required tasks. In the context of the current study, mentoring explains the social and professional relationship between a dyad (experienced and less experienced colleague) that aims to support the adjustment of less experienced colleagues to the university and their career advancement.

Study context

The context of the current study is a public university that was established in 1904. The total staff population is 2,521 who are in three different campuses of the university. There are currently, seven faculties offering academic programmes at the degree, honours, masters and doctoral levels. The dominant form of mentoring for professional staff is formal and it is organised through an institutional mentoring framework – the "on-board buddying programme". Nigah and colleagues (2012) refer to buddying as a socialisation tactic that could foster positive work attitude. Particularly, socialisation enables institutions to adopt a positive and context-appropriate attitude to enhance work processes, the work environment and assist new entrants to integrate into the work environment and lead to positive relationship between work engagement and psychological capital (Nigah et al., 2012). While the on-board buddying programme has been beneficial to some new staff, it has become necessary to examine how its implementation could be enhanced to provide all new employees with the mentoring support they need. Secondly, due to its unstructured format, the implementation of the on-board buddying programme depends on the commitment of heads of department to support the integration of new staff into the university. This study forms part of a broad institutional arrangement to develop a university-wide mentoring structure that supports the social integration of all new professional staff into the university.

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Participant	Gender	Campus	Level of staff
Ipeleng	Female	Bloemfontein	Officer
Paseka	Female	Bloemfontein	Officer
Jessica	Female	Bloemfontein	Officer
Nokwazi	Female	Bloemfontein	Researcher
Felleng	Female	Bloemfontein	Officer
Mamello	Female	Bloemfontein	Officer
Khumalo	Female	Bloemfontein	Senior Officer
Lauren	Female	Bloemfontein	Assistant Officer
Tursney	Female	Bloemfontein	Senior Officer
Maralize	Female	Bloemfontein	Senior Assistant Officer
Lineo	Female	Bloemfontein	Assistant Director
Maretha	Female	Bloemfontein	Assistant Director
Winnifred	Female	Bloemfontein	Officer
Audrey	Female	Bloemfontein	Senior Officer
Zithembe	Male	Bloemfontein	Senior Officer
Thumpe	Male	Bloemfontein	Coordinator
Thuto	Male	Bloemfontein	Senior Assistant Officer
Cornelius	Male	Bloemfontein	Senior Assistant Officer
Quinn	Male	Bloemfontein	Deputy Director
Bryan	Male	Bloemfontein	Senior Officer
Luan	Male	Bloemfontein	Senior Officer
Thabisa	Female	South Campus	Senior Assistant Officer
Maya	Female	South Campus	Deputy Director
Rosalie	Male	South Campus	Senior Assistant Officer
Olivia	Female	QwaQwa	Chief Officer
Dimpho	Female	QwaQwa	Senior Assistant Officer
Karabou	Female	QwaQwa	Coordinator
Rethabile	Female	QwaQwa	Coordinator
Thandolwethu	Female	QwaQwa	Senior Assistant Officer
Kholwa	Female	QwaQwa	Coordinator
Lindiwe	Female	QwaQwa	Messenger
Kamogelo	Female	QwaQwa	Officer
Dova	Female	QwaQwa	Officer
Refiloe	Female	QwaQwa	Assistant Officer
Zilindila	Male	QwaQwa	Assistant Officer
Nathaniel	Male	QwaQwa	Senior Officer
Malwande	Male	QwaQwa	Assistant Officer
Senate	Male	QwaQwa	Chief Officer
Morongwa	Male	QwaQwa	Senior Director
Carlos	Male	QwaQwa	Senior Officer
Boitumelo	Male	QwaQwa	Deputy Director

The participants consisted of 26 females (63.41%) and 15 males (36.59%). The professional ranks of participants were: Senior Director (1) 2.44%; Deputy Directors (3) 7.32%; Assistant Directors (2) 4.88%; Chief Officers (2) 4.88%; Senior Officers (8) 19.51%; Officers (8) 19.51%; Senior Assistant Officers (7) 17.07%; Assistant Officers (4) 9.76%; Messenger (1) 2.44 and others (5) 12.19%. The participants were allocated pseudonym in order to de-identify them (see table 1).

Research Methodology

A previous study by Thackwell and colleagues (2018) suggests that qualitative research could be used to examine the experiences of specialist mentees and to understand the value and potential challenges that emerge from mentoring relationships. Similarly, Daniel and colleagues (2019) examined the interaction between diversity and the mentoring process in a higher education setting using a qualitative approach. In line with the objectives of the current study and following from these previous scholarly studies, the current study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the perceptions and experiences of professional staff about the mentoring support they receive from colleagues. Qualitative research is conducted to understand events in their natural setting with a

focus on the perspectives and experiences of individuals that cannot be explained by way of objective measurements (Kyngäs et al., 2020).

Participants and sampling techniques

The participants were sampled from twenty-seven departments spread in three campuses of the university – Bloemfontein, QwaQwa, and South Campuses all located in the Free State province. In order to examine the perceptions and experiences of professional staff about mentoring, this study adopted purposive and snowball sampling to gather data from participants (Barglowski, 2018). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used because some participants consented to participate in the study after the researchers were introduced to their colleagues. The participants consisted of senior professional staff, who offer mentoring support to their colleagues, and some professional staff, who received or continue to receive mentoring support from their colleagues. Table 1 shows the demographic information of participants including their gender, sex and employment level in the university.

Fieldwork

Potential participants who consented to participate in the study responded to an initial invitation sent to them by the researcher. In particular, the study targeted professional staff of the university who were located in different departments across three campuses. Following their response to the invitation, an interview was arranged between the researcher and the participants. The interviews were held in the offices of the participants or departmental meeting rooms and each of the sessions lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour. The researcher requested each participant to provide his or her demographic data and agree to participate in the study by signing a consent form. This procedure was used after the participants had been briefed on the rationale of the study. A semi-structured discussion schedule administered to participants (see appendix 1). The interviews were conducted using voice-recording devices that were clearly displayed in front of the participants before the commencement of the discussion. All the voice recordings were transcribed and the transcripts were carefully crosschecked with the voice recorded to ensure that the feedback of participants were correctly captured in the transcripts.

To increase the trustworthiness of the data collected, the researcher followed three main steps. First, methodical thoroughness of the research design was maintained throughout the research. In practice the researcher ensured that there was clear alignment between the theoretical positioning (social constructivism), data collection and analysis process, and connection between empirical process, theories and discussion (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Secondly, data credibility maintained by following a repeated process of scrutinising the data and codes to ensure that the views of participants were correctly captured and analysed. Furthermore, the codes were analysed to reveal the main ideas that emerged from the interviews, the authenticity of the findings and the applicability of the research methods to future research (Pratt et al., 2020; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, by developing the codes, concepts, categories and themes of the data gathered through interviews, the researcher obtained details about the characteristics of the dataset and strong explanation of the mentoring experiences of professional staff who participated in the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure the confidentiality of the information provided by participants, the study followed three processes. First, participants were assured of the measures adopted to safely process, store and discard the data. Secondly, participants were informed not to provide personal identifiers that could easily connect their opinion to the data. Consequently, the original names were replaced with pseudonyms as shown in Table 1. Lastly, participants were informed that the study was solely designed for research purpose. The data were gathered data in an environment where the participants freely provided information about the mentoring support they receive or provide to their colleagues.

Ethical consideration

The university's Research Ethics Committee granted approval for this research across all the three campuses of the university. In line with the rules of ethical consideration, the rationale of the study, potential risks and benefits as well as the rights of participants were explained to all participants.

Data analysis

The data gathered was examined using thematic analysis that can be applied across different epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). Prior studies have shown that thematic analysis as a qualitative research method is used for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes that are found in a data set (Braun & Clarke 2006, Nowell et al., 2017). One of the advantages of thematic analysis is the theoretical freedom and flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that allow researchers to examine complex and rich datasets (Neuendorf, 2019). Also, the basis for developing codes, categories and themes of the data gathered is to provide details about the characteristics of a data and explanation of a phenomenon (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In the current study, the first step involved exploring the data for important phrases and sentences from the participants that addressed the importance of mentoring to professional staff. To determine the best codes that represent the views of participants, codes that appeared at least more than seven times were highlighted. Examples of codes identified were: "*I have benefitted from the on-board buddying programme*", "*I was assigned a mentor by my line manager*", "*I received support in the form of informal mentoring from my line manager*" and "*the mentoring I received as a new employee was sufficient for me to cope with the demands of my job.*"

The second step involved collapsing the codes that emerged into categories. For instance, "*I have benefitted from the on-board buddying programme*" and "*I was assigned a mentor by my line manager when I was appointed by the university*" were categorised as "formal mentoring". The third step involved identifying the themes based on the patterns developed from the codes and categories of the two different datasets. By adopting the thematic framework and probing the datasets, repeated patterns of meanings from the texts that were found were finally grouped and analysed according to the themes. Also, the detailed process of analysing the data was to ensure the 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 to future research (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Results

The four themes derived from the narrative data analysed are: institutional structure and mentoring processes; mentoring practice (formal and informal); links between mentoring and career development and the relevance of mentoring to professional staff. Detailed information on the themes arising from the analysed interviews are presented below.

Institutional structure and mentoring processes

The effective pairing of mentoring dyad by institutions is necessary because it ensures that mentees are assigned mentors who support them to adjust to their job setting (Hobson & Maxwell, 2020). Referring to the term on-board buddying in relation to the institutional mentorship arrangement for professional staff on campus, a participant stated that, "*the on-board buddying programme really helped me to adjust to the work environment.*" [Mamello]. Another participant explained how mentoring experiences could help mentees to familiarise themselves in the workplace and with work processes in a multi-campus setting:

As long as people familiarise themselves with the rules and regulations of the institution through mentorship support, mistakes can be kept at a minimum level. If I face any challenge, I know my faculty manager is a phone call away to assist me with any administrative task. Whenever there is a need, we would discuss issues on the phone because she is at the Bloemfontein campus [Dova].

On her part, Lineo who is an Assistant Director noted that she did not have a mentor because of her personal conviction:

I cannot identify someone in the university as my mentor. Not having a formal mentoring relationship with any individual could probably be because I am bad at reading social cues. However, may be people have offered mentoring support to me in subtle ways that I could not identify. Interpersonal skills is very important here. [Lineo].

Contrastingly, Maya who is a Deputy Director shared her views onthe expectations of staff about mentoring and the lack of mentors to support new employees on the job.

I think the biggest gap we have in our system is mentorship for new employees especially, those in the managerial positions. I joined the university from an operations background, and I had not occupied any managerial position in higher education. I was on my own and had to literally find my way through the system. I think that mentoring and coaching is important for persons occupying managerial positions.

Pressed further to explain why she felt that mentoring was important for persons in managerial positions, she noted that*, "as managers, we are entrusted with the implementation of strategic decisions so if you do not know the institutional cultures and work processes then you rely on word of mouth."* [Maya]. The views of Maya point to the importance of mentoring for persons who are appointed to managerial positions in the university. Peer mentoring is also important in the process of supporting new professional staff to integrate into the university. This was highlighted by Audrey who is a Senior Officer:

I have supported some of the new staff in my department [an informal mentoring arrangement]. However, I do not think that we have a mentoring structure that supports new employees. If each employee is assigned a mentor, they could be supported to cope with their tasks [Audrey].

The view of Audrey shows how peer mentoring could be useful in providing support to new professional staff. Quinn emphasised the importance of mentoring to the transformation of the university which includes the institutional culture:

As I indicated, the university has its own culture that should be understood by new employees. I do not expect a new staff to join today and understand the relationships between our department and the students' affairs directorate…it takes a bit of time for them to learn the norms and practices here.

The results revealed that while most participants believed that mentoring is important especially for new staff, others especially a few senior officers indicated that they did not perceive mentoring as an important tool that could be used to support the integration of new staff into the university. A participant also highlighted the importance of mentoring as a tool for promoting institutional transformation and the integration of new staff to the culture of the university. The results further revealed that geographical boundaries did not serve as barriers to the implementation of formal mentoring in the university. This also highlights the importance of technology in the mentoring process, especially for mentors and mentees who may not be in the same geographical location.

Mentoring practice (formal and informal)

Bhopal (2020) like many other researchers has argued that there are two main forms of mentoring: formal and informal. This study sought the views of participants about both forms of mentoring support they received from senior colleagues when they were employed by the university. Excerpts below represent the view of a participant:

> *Although I was not assigned a mentor when I joined the university, I would have wished to have a mentor because I think it makes a staff feel more comfortable. There are times I am not able to seek assistance from my colleagues because I feel that they are not ready to assist me* [Paseka].

The feedback from Paseka demonstrates the expectations of some professional staff to receive mentorship support from their colleagues. Focusing on informal mentoring, another senior participant stated that although there was no formal mentoring arrangement for her when she was appointed, she was supported by a senior colleague through informal mentoring:

> *I was fortunate to have shared an office with a senior colleague who was in a position to support me when I was appointed. To answer your question, I was not assigned a mentor when I was appointed by the university.* [Olivia].

Conversely, Nathaniel who was employed after serving as a volunteer for two years explained that*, "I was assigned a mentor when I was previously engaged as a volunteer student officer. I think that the mentoring process should be structured - especially for early career support staff"*. The views of Nathaniel demonstrate the variability in the assignment of mentors in the university. Similarly, Zithembe explained that he was assigned a mentor when he was appointed by the university: *"yes….I was assigned a mentor. My mentor exposed me to everything I needed to know about my current job."* Another participant noted:

> *I had a mentor who was very helpful to me. He was a very busy person who would work late in the evening and on weekends. He trained me to be hardworking and I looked up to him as my role model. Although he had a family, he was able to balance his schedule very well* [Bryan].

The feedback from participants revealed differences in the mentoring experiences of staff. These differences were not based on campus location because the responses of staff on all three campuses were mixed. However, what was evident was that the implementation of the on-board buddying programme is dependent on the decision of line managers to either support their staff or otherwise. Another outcome of the interview was the recommendation by a member of staff to adopt a more structured mentoring system to ensure new staff would be assigned mentors. Notwithstanding the importance of formal mentoring, the feedback also revealed the value of informal mentoring in supporting professional staff to adjust to the university environment and their work.

Link between mentoring and career development

Another important aspect of mentoring is the opportunity it offers to mentees to develop their careers. The study sought the views of participants about how mentoring could serve as a tool to enhance their career development. Felleng, who had worked in the university for eight months at the time of interview, highlighted the relationship between mentoring and career development of professional staff:

> *I am currently learning new things while I work with the support of a mentor to adjust to the university environment. My mentor had to introduce me to my current work by teaching me what I should do and how to relate with my colleagues in and outside our department….it is a continuous learning process* [Felleng].

The views of Felleng demonstrate how institutional knowledge is essential to the mentoring process in universities. Organisational knowledge serves as an important element in the mentoring process of individuals and their career development (Turban et al., 2017). Senate shared his opinion on how mentoring could lead to the career development of young professional staff, "*when young graduates are employed, they join with very little or no job experience. What we do as a department is to assign a senior colleague who supports the new staff and provides the line manager with periodic report about the performance of the staff.*" Lauren, who is an Assistant Officer, noted that when line managers serve as mentors of professional staff, it could enhance their career development, "*I think that the support of line managers through mentoring and supervision are important to our [staff] career development. They are always in a better position to support our career progression*"

The results reveal that mentoring serves as a tool for supporting new professional staff to gain institutional knowledge and for their line managers to monitor their adjustment and performance. Feedback from participants also showed that mentoring is helpful in that it enable mentees to continually learn. The responses from participants also revealed that there is a link between mentoring and the career development of professional staff across the different campuses.

The relevance of mentoring to professional staff

Refiloe highlighted what she perceived as the importance of mentoring to her in the work environment:

> *I had a mentor who trained me on the internal electronic systems. I would say it was enough for me because I got adequate knowledge and skills in the application of the system. However, you can never say you are perfect……you need to continue to learn*.

Similarly, another participant explained the importance of mentoring, especially in helping new employees to adjust to the university environment:

> *When I was employed, I was informed of my responsibilities and I commenced work. Unfortunately, I was not assigned a mentor. Mentoring creates a sense of belonging among staff and make them adjust to the university environment especially the various departments and offices. Again, if you go wrong along the way, you always have somebody on your side to guide you* [Carlos].

Thabisa explained that she found the mentoring process to be very useful. She stated that:

> *I was assigned a mentor when I joined the university and I found it to be useful. I started as an intern so every month we used to have reports to check if the person who is mentoring you is doing a good job doing that.* [Thabisa].

The absence of formal mentoring arrangements means that line managers should develop internal systems to support the integration of new professional staff. This was highlighted by one of the participants who stated that in the absence of formal mentoring in the department, by building relationships with senior colleagues, she had developed good social relationships with some senior colleagues: "*no……it is sink or die….no one mentors you. There is no mentoring support for support staff. Therefore, what people generally do is to build relationships with certain individuals through informal mentorship.*" [Jessica].

The results show that mentoring is seen to serve as a tool that enhance the learning processes of new staff especially, concerning their acquisition of relevant job knowledge and skills. Also, mentoring helps new professional staff to adjust to the university environment. It was quite clear from the feedback gathered that staff who joined the university as interns experienced formal

structured mentoring that included effective monitoring systems. An important takeaway from the interviews is that mentoring should be seen as a continuous staff developmental process that is not only limited to new employees. This could include informal mentoring that enable staff to develop good social relationships with their colleagues within and across the different campuses of the university.

Discussion

The mentoring experiences of new professional staff in universities are important to their social integration and their professional development. Although prior scholarly studies on mentoring have highlighted the importance of mentoring to academics in universities (Fowler, 2017; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020), considerably less attention had been paid to the mentoring needs of professional staff in university settings. In the context of the current study, while the on-board buddying programme has been beneficial to some new staff, it had become necessary to examine how its implementation alongside informal mentoring could be improved to enhance the social and professional experiences of new staff. As a first approach towards addressing this research gap, the current study drew on the social constructivist theory (Fischer, 2019; Shapiro, 2020) to examine how the mentoring context (institutional structure and culture) influence the perceptions and experiences of professional staff about the mentoring in the university. Importantly, individual protégés, mentors and organisations derive some benefits from mentoring (Ensher & Murphy 2011, Huybrecht et al., 2011) in an institutional setting.

The findings of the current study provide insight into existing practices regarding mentoring for professional staff in the university from social constructivist perspective in two main ways. First, the study showed that mentoring through social and professional interaction between mentors and mentees can enhance the career advancement of professional staff who are members of diverse professional communities. Particularly, through formal and informal mentoring arrangement, an expert culture that include knowledge, skills and attitude (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2022) are transferred through a continuous learning process from senior colleagues to new or early career professional staff. This finding aligns with earlier research that shows that proactive and intentional actions by individuals, in positively constructing their careers (Cenciotti et al., 2017), especially through the support received from senior colleagues, can enhance their career advancement.

Second, the results revealed that mentoring serves as an important tool for supporting new professional staff to adjust to the professional community and culture of the university. Particularly, new professional staff in the university create knowledge and make social meaning of the university based on how well they are socialised into the university environment. However, not all participants perceived mentoring as an important tool that could be used to support the integration of new staff into the university. This finding underscores how mentoring could be positioned and actualised as an integral component of the university's culture and practice that promotes the sense of belonging of new staff and their quick adaptation to the university environment. The findings also showed that the geographically dispersed locations of the university did not hinder the mentoring arrangements between the dyads as they relied on technology to maintain their mentoring relationships. This result further highlights the importance of technology in modern mentoring processes (Güler & Çelik, 2022; Williams & Kim, 2011), especially for mentors and mentees who may be geographically dispersed.

Beyond institutional mentoring structure, is the culture that prescribes the norms and values that new and early career professional staff must acquire in the university. A prior study (Benson et al., 2020) has shown that culture indirectly affects the careers of individuals through variances in human resource practices, employment systems, practices of members of an expert community and the adaptation of staff to their work environment. Therefore, when employees proactively learn the norms, values and goals of the institutions and take responsibility for their learning and

development, it could lead to enhanced career success (Turban et al., 2017). In complementary ways, employees have expectations of the support institutions should provide to them to enhance their career advancement (Dose et al., 2019) through mentoring. The findings of the current study show that mentoring enables new professional staff to gain a better knowledge of the university which includes the cultures and sub-cultures and for them to easily adjust to their new work environment. The study also revealed that through mentoring, line managers can monitor the performance of new professional staff especially, new graduates and provide them with the support they need to enhance their career development.

Implications for practice

The implications for the current study in relation to practice are discussed under the following themes: institutional structure and mentoring processes; relationship between mentoring and career development; mentoring practice (formal and informal) and; the relevance of mentoring to professional staff.

Institutional structure and mentoring processes

Institutional context (structure and culture) is important to the mentoring support professional staff receive in the university. As shown by the findings of this study, professional staff familiarise themselves with the practices and cultures of the university especially when they receive mentoring support from their senior colleagues and peers. Also, the findings of this study show that it is important for institutions to put in place mentoring support for staff who are appointed to leadership positions. Central to this view is the complex nature of the academic environment and the need for persons appointed to managerial positions to understand the evolving needs of students and academics and the competitive academic space. However, the current study did not reveal many differences in the mentoring practices across the different campuses. What was clear was that the adoption of mentoring practices was dependent on a line-manager's decision to either implement the on-boarding programme or otherwise. This further shows that the mentoring arrangements in the current study are dependent on the decisions of line managers.

The study revealed that the majority of participants anticipate some form of institutional support structure to help professional staff to adjust to the university environment and cope with their new work roles. This is consistent with Tillman (2001) who argues that institutions should turn their attention to implementing mentoring initiatives that are institutionally driven and incorporate planned experiences that enhance the growth and development of staff by way of their emotional, cultural, and social adjustment. Therefore, through socialisation, professional staff acquire the values, attitudes, norms, knowledge, and skills needed to perform their jobs in the university. In the context of the current study, the on-boarding programme represents an institutional support structure that aims to enhance the integration of new staff into the university environment. Although the university's "on-board buddying" programme aims to assist the adjustment of new entrants into the university and seem very laudable, one of its limitations is that its successful implementation is highly dependent on the commitment of line managers. However, other work has shown that merely having a mentor in an institution is not sufficient (Wexler, 2020) for the social and cultural integration of staff. On the contrary, what is required is institutional intention and commitment that will lead to the successful uptake of mentoring by the various professional units and departments.

Relationship between mentoring and career development

One of the outcomes of the current study is the importance of mentoring to the career development of professional staff in the university. The realities of a modern knowledge-based economy suggest that individuals obtain career information and guidance from different sources and multiple relationships (Zellers et al., 2008) that include mentoring. The findings of the current study show that mentoring involves a learning process where professional staff learn about the work processes, networks and work environment that are important for their career development. This is

consistent with earlier research that suggest that learning opportunities lead to enhanced organisational knowledge and career success (Turban et al., 2017).

Mentoring practice (formal and informal)

Professional staff who receive mentorship support obtain the following benefits: quick responses to questions regarding the work environment and processes from their mentors; dedicated support from a mentor; exposure to the university environment and relevant departments; and continuous learning support from senior colleagues and peers to new professional staff. These benefits were obtained from the interview data gathered from the study participants. This outcome is consistent with Hudson (2016) who shows that positive relationships between mentors and mentees are built on trust and respect through the sharing of information, and a supportive culture that include shared problem-solving approaches. Contrastingly, professional staff who do not experience formal or informal mentoring face difficulties in coping with their new responsibilities, work demands, and adjusting to the institutional culture, structure and practices. The results therefore point to the need for the university to enhance its formal mentoring programme through strong policy formulation that oblige heads of departments to provide mentoring support for new professional staff. A previous study has shown that institutional mentoring architectures can be enhanced by a comprehensive and coherent mentoring superstructure that create conducive conditions for the development and maintenance of effective mentoring substructures in educational institutions (Hobson & Maxwell, 2020). Mentoring could also be enhanced by informal arrangements by line managers to ensure that new professional staff are well socialised into the university environment.

The relevance of mentoring to professional staff

Feedback from participants revealed that mentoring for professional staff serve as avenues for providing training support to staff, a learning process and an opportunity for new entrants to adjust to the work environment. Therefore, by means of social-political and cultural discursive arrangements (Kemmis et al. 2014), the university can rely on the knowledge and skills of a pool of experts in a professional community to provide mentoring support for professional staff to enhance their professional development. Prior study has shown that through the ethics of care, senior colleagues and mentors provide support to mentees by listening to their concerns and issues and attending to their challenges in the workplace setting (Oberhauser & Caretta, 2019). Conversely, when new employees and early career professional staff are not provided with mentoring support, they face challenges in adapting to the work environment, miss the opportunity to quickly learn their new roles and, take more time to become accustomed to the values, norms and practices in the university. Central to the mentoring process for professional staff is the learning that takes place through a relationship that is developed by the mentoring dyad in a specific work environment that could also enhance their professional development. Such structured mentoring arrangements could be purposefully designed to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making through the direct application of learning (Jordaan et al., 2018).

Limitations and future research

The findings of the current study are discussed in the light of some weaknesses and future research propositions. The use of social constructivism as the theoretical underpinning shows that other features, such as mentoring as a social exchange process between mentors and mentees could not be examined. Particularly, the social exchange provides a different dimension to the concept of mentoring among professionals. While the researcher considered social constructivism as the appropriate framework to use in the current study due the contextual and cultural reasons, future research could examine how mentoring enhances the adjustment and career advancement of professional staff in higher education by adopting other theories. Second, data from the current study was gathered from a multi-campus setting. Future research could focus of data from professional staff in dissimilar university formats in order to reveal how the sub-cultures of the

professional communities in different universities enhance the mentoring experiences of professional staff.

Conclusion

The current study examines how mentoring support can enhance the work adjustment and career advancement of professional staff in a university in South Africa. Also, this study focuses on exploring how intuitional context (structure and culture) interface with existing mentoring practices to provide rich learning experiences and the adaptation of professional staff. As a result, four main themes that emerged from the data provide conceptual and empirical insights into the perceptions and experiences of professional staff about mentoring in the study setting: institutional structure and culture; relationship between mentoring and career development; importance of mentoring and; current mentoring practices. The findings show that professional staff perceived mentoring as an important tool that could be used to support the professional development and integration of new staff into the university. The results also indicate that the geographically dispersed settings of the university did not hinder the mentoring arrangements between mentors and mentees especially as the dyads relied on technology to support the mentoring arrangement. However, it was evident that the adoption of mentoring as a practice is highly dependent on the decisions of line mangers to encourage informal mentoring arrangements or adopt the formal on-boarding buddying programme.

Secondly, the study revealed that through formal and informal mentoring arrangements, an expert culture that includes knowledge, skills and attitude are transferred via learning processes from senior colleagues and peers to new or early career professional staff. When senior colleagues who constitute part of an expert community provide support to professional staff, new entrants and early career professional staff are able to adjust to the university environment and familiarise themselves with the work processes, cultures and sub-cultures of the university. Lastly, the current study reveals that the career context (institutional structure and culture) can serve as a space that enhances the mentoring experiences and career advancement of professional staff especially when universities establish formal mentoring structures with clear objectives and outcomes. This finding further demonstrates how mentoring can serve as a tool for supporting professional staff to adjust to a university with geographically dispersed campuses. However, the outcomes of this study do not discount the importance and advantages of informal mentoring especially among professional staff. As shown in the results section, informal mentoring can enhance the professional development and integration of new professional staff to the university through the commitment of line managers.

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About the authors

Yaw Owusu-Agyeman is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Directorate for Institutional Research and Academic Planning, University of the Free State, South Africa, and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK. His research interests include workforce development in higher education, adult and lifelong learning, educational leadership and student engagement.

Appendix 1

Interview schedule

1. What mentoring programme is available in your department to support new staff to adjust to the university environment?
2. Were you assigned a mentor (or equivalent support person) when you were appointed by the university? (please indicate whether formal or informal)
3. What form of mentoring support did you receive from your department when you were employed by the university? (formal or informal)
4. What specific role does your mentor play in your professional development and social adjustment to the university?
5. As a professional staff, what benefits have you gained from the mentoring support provided by your mentor?
6. Please provide us with any additional information you may want to share in relation to mentoring for professional staff in your department and the university.
7. How would you describe your mentoring experiences and relationship with your mentor?
8. Would you describe the mentoring for newly employed staff as sufficient for mentees to cope with the demands of their job and to enhance their career development?