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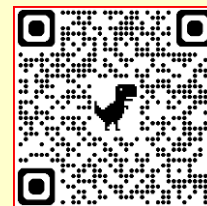
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The Mentor's Role in University Students' Practical Training

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring in education has been described as a process through which experienced teachers at all levels provide guidance and emotional support to trainees or mentees over a period of time. This study aims to analyze the role of the mentor in university students' practical training, focusing on the benefits for students and mentors themselves, as well as on the potential challenges mentors face. The study uses a literature search and systematic review based on specified selection criteria and searches in scientific databases including Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus. The review indicates that mentors provide guidance, support, advice, and regular feedback; help students develop professional skills; and strengthen students' self-esteem and self-confidence. Mentors also benefit through professional learning and development. Reported challenges include differences in students' knowledge and skills, limited time, assessment difficulties, conflict management, and insufficient support from other stakeholders involved in practical training. Despite these difficulties, the mentor's role is essential to students' personal and professional development, and appropriate institutional support can help address the challenges effectively.

KEY WORDS: benefits, challenges, mentor, practical training, university students.

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative literature-review study aims to explore in depth the role of the mentor during the practical training of higher-education students. It highlights both the benefits arising for students and mentors themselves and the challenges mentors may encounter while performing their role. Preparing future university graduates for the labour market is one of the most important priorities of higher education. Practical training undertaken by students during their

studies in public- and private-sector organizations plays a key role in this direction. Practical-training experiences strengthen students' readiness for the labour market by promoting the application of skills and the attainment of desired qualifications, while also enhancing professional conduct, reliability, and work experience (Trosset, McCormack & Leatham, 2019).

The implementation of practical training requires cooperation among the various stakeholders involved, both from the university and from

the host organization. The participants are individuals with different backgrounds and perceptions, and the mentor is a central figure in this process, possibly playing its most decisive role. This is the role examined by the present literature review. The following section clarifies the concept of the mentor and analyses the specific characteristics a mentor should possess when supervising the practical training of higher-education students.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF MENTORING

In education, mentoring is described as a process through which experienced teachers at all levels provide both instructional guidance and emotional support to trainees over a specified period of time (Barrera et al., 2010). In the university context in particular, the mentor's role is decisive because the mentor guides students during their practical training. Through this process, students can acquire professional skills and experiences that theoretical preparation alone cannot provide. According to Schmith and Wolfe (as cited in Jacobi, 2012), a mentor is defined as a partner or supervisor who offers guidance and support to the mentee while also providing opportunities for personal and professional development.

Theodorou and Petridou (2014) describe the mentor as an experienced educator who, through a continuous and systematic process, guides, advises, and empowers the student, developing a creative and meaningful collaboration. Malderez and Bodoczky (2010) emphasize that the mentor performs multiple roles: serving as an inspiring teacher role model, acting as a source of knowledge, designing learning experiences, and standing supportively alongside the student. The mentor's role can have a significant impact on the wider educational environment, teaching, and students' continuing professional development, since the mentor's primary mission is to contribute to improving the quality of teaching and, more broadly, education (Athanasios et al., 2010). In essence, the mentor seeks to improve the teaching practices of students, who often have not yet acquired the necessary experience (Fragoulis, Papadakis & Velisarios, 2015).

To respond effectively to the multiple demands of their role, mentors need to possess specific characteristics. Among the key qualities that should distinguish them are enthusiasm for teaching, patience, an understanding of students' needs, and empathy. They should also inspire trust, provide substantive support to mentees, be fair in their judgements, and offer clear and constructive feedback. It is equally important for them to have practical experience in their professional field as well as experience in the mentoring role itself. A good mentor does not merely guide; the mentor is also a source of inspiration, encourages and motivates students, and acts as a positive role model (Huybrecht et al., 2011; Kaihlanen et al., 2013).

Self-awareness and self-confidence, together with the ability to approach students respectfully and sensitively, are regarded as fundamental qualities. Mentors should be receptive to innovative ideas and, at the same time, have a clear vision so that they can advance the goals of the educational process effectively. Skills in reflection and critical analysis are equally important because they enable mentors to identify problems and contribute actively to resolving them (Caspersen & Raaen, 2015; Smith, 2010; Moir, 2015).

Papanoum (2009) also emphasizes the importance of mentors having an adequate knowledge base, teaching skills, and a command of contemporary teaching approaches. These elements are considered essential for effective guidance. In addition, qualities such as

creativity, the ability to inspire, intuition, and responsibility contribute substantially to effective communication and the development of trusting relationships with the trainee or mentee (Booren, Johnson, Niday & Potts, 2009).

Mentors must also possess adequate mentoring skills. This means that they should be able to collaborate meaningfully with trainees in both the design and implementation of the educational programme, with an emphasis on professional development and the improvement of the learning process for participants (Langdon et al., 2012). Mudzielwana and Maphosa (2014) express similar views and additionally highlight humor and enthusiasm as key characteristics that mentors should possess in order to strengthen a positive climate and interaction with mentees.

Findings from several other studies indicate that one of the central elements of successful mentoring is the development of a high-quality and meaningful relationship between mentor and trainee. In this context, in addition to the required formal qualifications, it is equally important for the mentor to possess communication and interpersonal skills, which contribute decisively to developing a healthy and effective relationship with the trainee. In summary, the main requirements a mentor should meet include: in-depth knowledge of the relevant academic or professional field and the ability to communicate it effectively (teaching skills); an understanding of how people learn and develop (pedagogical knowledge); awareness of the social, cultural, and institutional context of educational reality; and organizational abilities related to the management and coordination of individuals and groups (Green-Powell, 2012; Barrera, Braley & Slate, 2010; Vogiatzi, 2015; Zachariadi, 2011; Phillips & Fragoulis, 2010; Smith, 2010; Celik, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study comprises a literature search and a systematic review, that is, a critical appraisal of studies using specific criteria (Galanis, 2009), conducted in scientific databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and others. The keywords used in Greek and English included terms such as 'mentor', 'university students' practical training', and 'professional development through mentoring'. Sources examining mentoring in practical training from the perspectives of both students and mentors were selected.

The sources were then evaluated according to the following criteria: Greek-language and international conference and journal articles, books, edited volumes, and theoretical and empirical studies addressing mentoring in university students' practical training and published between 2010 and 2025 were selected. Only sources analyzing the benefits and challenges of mentoring from the perspectives of mentors and students within higher-education practical training were included; studies concerning other educational contexts were excluded. The selected sources were analyzed according to their content and in relation to the purpose of the study. The literature search was carried out by the researchers over a five-month period.

RESULTS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The international scholarly literature examining the mentor's role in university students' practical training has focused mainly on the mentor's personality as a guiding figure for students preparing for their professional careers. It has also examined the positive

outcomes of mentoring for students and the dynamic relationship that develops between mentor and students during practical experience (Mukeredzi, 2017; Wang & Fulton, 2012). Attention has additionally been paid to the difficulties mentors may encounter, including a lack of available time and the management of unforeseen situations during practical training (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Kominia & Avgitidou, 2013; Androusou & Tsafos, 2013).

Benefits for Mentors

Despite the obstacles and challenges mentors encounter, which are discussed below, they also gain several benefits. Through interaction, mentors not only contribute to the development of mentees but also develop themselves. They have the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience and derive satisfaction from doing so; remain informed about the latest scientific developments, thereby strengthening their own knowledge; and, of course, advance professionally (Huybrecht et al., 2011; Navarra et al., 2018).

Mentors feel less isolated, engage in self-criticism regarding their methods and practices, encounter innovative methods and programs incorporating new technologies, acquire new knowledge and skills, renew their professional repertoire, develop strategies, and strengthen their communication skills (Bird & Hudson, 2015; Fruith & Wray-Lake, 2013).

More specifically, through advice and recommended good practices, mentors strengthen the development of the mentee's skills and knowledge within a relationship based on interaction and mutual cooperation (LINC, 2015). For this reason, mentors are regarded as important agents of change and professional progress because they contribute substantially to strengthening trainees' or mentees' self-confidence and professional readiness (Luck, 2013). Engagement in the mentoring relationship also has a positive effect on mentors' personal and professional development, influencing their personality, experience, teaching style and philosophy (Ambrosetti, 2014).

Furthermore, mentors gain status and self-esteem and are inspired by the energy of their mentees. At the same time, they improve their position in the professional field and their self-image, create opportunities for career advancement, and experience satisfaction and pride in assuming their role, particularly when they observe their mentees' progress (Casey & Claunch, 2015). Mentors often continue their relationship with mentees after the formal mentoring arrangement has ended, maintaining collegial contact. This is not accidental, since mentoring gives them an opportunity to move beyond the exhaustion and monotony that may be caused by the repetitive nature of teaching, professional stagnation, and limited opportunities for advancement.

In summary, mentoring functions as an antidote to stagnation and provides mentors with an opportunity to reaffirm their value, while also enabling them to share new knowledge, skills, and experience with others (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Daresh, 2013; Feiman-Nemser, 2013; Ambrosetti et al., 2014).

Benefits for Students

The results of this study's literature review also show that mentors provide students with guidance, support, advice, and frequent feedback, while contributing to the development of professional skills and the strengthening of students' self-esteem and self-confidence. Students derive multiple benefits from their relationship with mentors. In summary, they experience reduced anxiety, avoid unrealistic expectations, and become familiar with professional reality (Ulvik & Sunde, 2013).

In addition, the acquisition of knowledge, the learning and improvement of skills, and cooperation are strengthened, as students are accepted as equal members of the team. Additional benefits for students in recent years include learning and applying evidence-based practice, as well as strengthening interdisciplinary learning and teaching. All these factors contribute to the acquisition of the resources and capabilities necessary for their continuing professional careers (Huybrecht et al., 2011; Kaihlanen, 2013).

The entire mentoring process should take place within a climate of trust and open communication, both between the two parties - mentors and students - and with the university department supporting the practical-training programme, with the aim of strengthening the leadership and other skills of mentees. Mentor support becomes particularly important through the close relationship and personal experience the mentor provides, which positively influences mentees' professional practice, while knowledge exchanges become stronger over time (Sowell, 2017). Mentoring therefore functions as a strategy for professional development and the integration of new professionals, with the mentor defined as an experienced adviser (Jarvis, 2004).

Particularly for students in education-related disciplines, many researchers agree that the first years of teaching are critical to a teacher's development and that a suitable mentor can play an important role in the future teacher's smooth adaptation to school processes and culture, as well as in professional socialization (Hobson et al., 2016; Hobson et al., 2013; Yuan & Zhang, 2017; Talbot, Denny & Henderson, 2018).

Through the professional, practical, and emotional support provided to the mentee, the student enters the world of teaching and acquires experiences, knowledge, and skills. At the same time, the student develops strategies for dealing with stress and tension and learns how to manage difficult situations and resolve conflicts. The student also becomes familiar with solving technical and practical problems, such as time management, classroom management, discipline, and workload, thereby strengthening communication skills and learning how to collaborate effectively. Through this mentoring relationship, new teachers develop a strong sense of belonging and the reassuring feeling that others care about them, providing emotional support and security (Schwarz & Dori, 2016; Elkin, 2016; Wetzell, Hoffman, & Maloch, 2017).

Difficulties and Obstacles

As expected, the mentor's role and the effective implementation of mentoring programs constitute a complex process. Many studies examine the factors affecting the success of such programs, as well as those that may hinder their successful implementation. Time, workload, and proximity between the mentor and the newly entering trainee are fundamental factors (Long et al., 2012). Time constraints and increased workload, in particular, restrict the flexibility of mentoring programs because they affect both the quantity and the quality of meetings between mentor and trainee (Huybrecht et al., 2011; Phillips & Fragoulis, 2010). The negative effect of insufficient time on programme effectiveness is also emphasized by Bubb (2017).

Other challenges mentors may be called upon to address include the need to balance students' differing requirements; potentially limited support from the organizational hierarchy; difficulties in assessment, especially in the absence of clear criteria; differences in students' levels of knowledge and skills; conflict management; and a lack of support from other parties during practical training (Yee Mok & Staub, 2021; Hudson, 2013, 2014, 2016; Pampouri, 2016; Heeneman

& de Grave, 2019; Sofos et al., 2015; Kortesi-Dafermou, Sfyroera, & Tsermidou, 2013; Moulara & Sougari, 2019; Nikolovska, 2016).

To prepare mentors more effectively and help them address difficulties and potential obstacles, their participation in training programs and specialized seminars is recommended (Zannini et al., 2011). Such programs should include instruction in teaching techniques for educational settings, an understanding of different learning styles, and preparation for the specific needs of adult education.

Mentors, on the other hand, believe that the success of their role depends to a considerable extent on students' attitudes and behavior, since the mentor-trainee relationship is reciprocal and mutually influential. More specifically, they believe that students should demonstrate an interest in learning, be willing to cooperate, show a disposition towards self-criticism, and be receptive to the instructions and advice provided by mentors (Huybrecht et al., 2011; Navarra et al., 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

The literature review discussed above indicates that, although mentors face many difficulties in the practical training of higher-education students, these difficulties are not insurmountable. Because mentors play an essential and pivotal role in students' personal and professional development, appropriate support is required, first and foremost from universities and their departments, but also from the state more broadly, so that challenges, obstacles, and difficulties can be addressed effectively.

The present study seeks to contribute positively in this direction by highlighting the central and decisive importance of the mentor's role in university students' practical training. Finally, further empirical and quantitative research on the mentor's role in the practical training of higher-education students is considered necessary.

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