

ICED 2020 proceedings:

Fostering transnational virtual mentoring relationships: Possibilities and pitfalls

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Abstract

Faculty members play a central role in designing meaningful learning experiences for students, and therefore require pedagogical expertise to do so in higher education settings. The Aga Khan University initiated a two-year virtual mentorship program to support faculty in enhancing their teaching, learning and its scholarship. The study engaged 22 AKU faculty and eight academics drawn from North America under the auspices of Academic without Borders (AWB). At the end of the study, six mentor-mentee pairs continued their mentorship, while others dropped out. A study was conducted to determine the factors that hindered and/or facilitated the success of the program, namely achievement of outcomes that participants set at the onset of the program. Qualitative methods such as interviews and document analysis were employed. The findings reveal that commitment, alignment between the mentoring goals and the professional roles of mentees, clarity about mentorship goals and high levels of commitment by both mentors and mentees contributed to the achievement of goals. However, mentees' unwillingness to work with a mentor from a different discipline; cross-cultural differences on how mentors and mentees viewed mentorship; misalignment of mentoring goals with mentees' professional roles; and lack of face-to-face interactions hindered faculty from achieving their outcomes. The study presents important lessons for future faculty development programming, particularly in settings similar to the study context.

1 Introduction

Faculty are the lynchpin in the design of learning experiences in higher education settings. In order to support faculty design of teaching and learning experiences that meet the demands of learners and the industries that subsequently absorb them, various professional development programs have been put in place by institutions. Among such programmes is workplace mentoring, which is increasingly considered to be an effective model for faculty development in higher education (Weimer, 2015). A review of mentoring initiatives in higher education shows that effective mentoring relationships focus on development of individuals, facilitate professional and career development, and are personal, reciprocal and beneficial to both mentors and mentees in tangible ways (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Osula & Irwin (2009) further suggest that both the mentor and the mentee need to adopt a certain cultural awareness and perspective, which they refer to as a "third-culture perspective" (p. 37) in order to enhance the relationship between them. This is likely to improve their

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mentoring outcomes. They argue that when working in global teams, the ability to think outside one's culture and see an issue through the eyes of another is critical to mentoring success.

The Network of Quality, Teaching and Learning (QTL_net) of Aga Khan University (AKU), in partnership with Academics without Borders (AWB), designed and implemented a two-year virtual mentorship program aimed at developing faculty capacity in teaching, learning and its scholarship so as to provide students with improved learning experiences and thereby enable them to thrive in their professional careers. The program involved faculty members from Pakistan and East Africa (mentees) and North America (mentors). The mentors were drawn from the disciplines of Nursing, Medicine and Education. The mentors, on the other hand, were either drawn from the aforementioned disciplines or were engaged in faculty development.

2 Methodology

The study was conducted alongside the mentorship program's implementation, and aimed to examine the factors that affected the success or failure of the mentoring relationships. The study used qualitative methods, and data were collected primarily through interviews and document analysis. The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board at AKU and followed the guidelines for the protection of participant confidentiality.

Data from mentors and mentees were collected through interviews. In total, seven mentees (out of total of 22) and six mentors (out of eight) participated in the interviews. Amongst these participants were two mentees who dropped out of the program. There was also a mentor whose mentees all dropped out. The data from interviews were audio recorded and manually transcribed by listening to the interviews. Transcriptions were manually assigned codes to chunk the data. Similarly, data from the documentary sources were also assigned manual codes. These codes were clustered and condensed into broader categories, from which broad themes were derived, further analysed and conclusions drawn.

3 Findings and discussion

The participants (mentor-mentee pairs) set their goals at the onset of the program. An analysis of their work-plan agreements revealed that the mentees intended to provide quality learning experiences to students through the design of inter-disciplinary courses, enhance their use of active teaching strategies, enhance their assessment and feedback strategies, engage in curriculum development and adopt a scholarly approach to teaching and learning.

In total, 22 AKU faculty (11 males and 19 females) and eight AWB mentors (two males and six females) totalling 22 mentoring pairs were part of the program. By the end of the first year of the programme, six mentor-mentee pairs had dropped out of the program. By the end of the second year, another ten mentor-mentee pairs ceased to continue their relationships and did not achieve all their pre-set outcomes. However, six relationships flourished above and beyond the duration of the program. Of the 16 pairs that dropped out, six mentees left the institution and hence were not part of the radar of the study, while the rest made "quiet exits" without alerting their mentors or program coordinators. This was perhaps because the program was associated with QTL_net, which is situated in the Office of the Provost. Faculty may have been apprehensive about their lack of outcomes becoming public knowledge, perhaps leading to a dent in their reputations or some form of censure from the university authorities, including their performance appraisals. Nevertheless, their silence made it difficult to diagnose the issues that they were facing and make the necessary support structures available.

All six mentors and seven mentees who were interviewed, irrespective of the outcomes of their mentoring relationships, viewed the programme as useful. For example, one mentee stated that "it was a good learning platform for me" [AJ, 01-03-2017]. Another shared that "I think it's a good programme. I think that we should not abandon it ... we should refine it... it can be a great success" [SS, 20-02-2017]. Mentors also found the programme beneficial, as explained

by one who talked of the “potential”, “opportunity” and “a way” to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning:

The potential. The opportunity. The willingness, and Aga Khan University’s commitment to continuously improve teaching and learning and to support the faculty, their colleagues, and their folks to work together. It is putting their money where the need is and supporting the faculty to engage in new ways of teaching and learning at work. So, I think the potential is the best for me. [SC, 02-02-2017]

The findings show that the successful mentor-mentee relationships through which faculty enhanced their teaching and research skills were a result of positive alignment between the mentoring goals and the professional roles of mentees, clarity about mentorship goals, and high levels of commitment by both mentors and mentees.

The study established that high levels of commitment to the relationship were required of both mentor and mentee. This commitment was facilitated by several factors. First was the development of an understanding of each other: an understanding of the career aspirations and intentions which led each to engage in the mentorship relationship, and an understanding of each other’s working style and preferences. Sometimes this understanding was underpinned by a deep sense of “curiosity” to know each other’s professional roles, responsibilities, aspirations and the context in which they each worked. Alignment, on the other hand, was built by commonalities such as common research interests and the teaching of similar courses, albeit in different parts of the world. Furthermore, where the goals of individual mentees were clearly laid down and were aligned with their current mentoring responsibilities, the relationships flourished.

It was observed that the program experienced high mentee attrition rates. Five key reasons behind the attrition were the mentees’ unwillingness to work with a mentor from a different discipline; cross-cultural differences as to how the mentors and mentees viewed mentorship; misalignment of mentoring goals with mentees’ professional roles; lack of face-to-face interactions; and unmet expectations about support for mentorship activities.

It is evident from the study that perceived similarity in disciplines and professional roles was central to the success of the mentoring relationships. Simply being teachers in higher education settings was not sufficient to cement relationships. Those pairs who had similar disciplinary backgrounds and professional roles were able to achieve their set outcomes. In addition, differing cultural perceptions about the role of the mentor and mentee led to confusion about who would steer the relationship towards achieving the set goals. While mentors considered that “hand holding” mentees would be “directive” and therefore waited for their mentees to take the lead, the mentees sought and acclaimed “directions” and “hand holding” when provided to them by their mentors. Be that as it may, the mentors and mentees who had prior cross cultural experiences were more understanding of each other’s cultures and hence were able to nurture their relationships. This contrasted with those who had no prior cross-cultural exposure whatsoever. Hence, it was no surprise that some mentees suggested that cultural understanding between themselves and their mentors could have been mediated through face-to-face meetings and exposure to each other’s institutional workplaces.

4 Recommendations

The recommendations in the following sections can be of help in designing mentoring programs in higher education that can enhance faculty capabilities in providing students with meaningful learning experiences.

4.1 SMART goals

Support from Teaching and Learning centres is necessary to ensure that mentees and mentors develop specific, measurable and time-bound goals before they are “left” to work on their own.

4.2 Raising cultural awareness

Inter-cultural mentorship programs need deliberation about the roles of mentors and mentees at the beginning of the program to foster clarity about mentor-mentee roles. In addition, face-to-face meetings or inter-institutional visits might be considered to foster a better understanding of contexts and build relationships.

4.3 Safe exit procedures

Faculty found it difficult to admit that their relationships were not working. This is perhaps because program coordinators did not discuss the exit procedures at the outset of the program. Since mentoring may or may not work, there is a need to provide safe exit procedures to faculty so that participants do not feel obliged to be part of the mentorship if the relationship is not yielding set outcomes.

4.4 Frequent communication

Increasing the frequency of communication with participants from “once a year” to “once a semester” at the onset of the program would help mentors and mentees (who are also faculty with busy schedules) to determine when to report their progress to the programme coordinators.

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