

## Informal Faculty Mentoring Practices in Higher Education in Kazakhstan

Gulsaule Kairat \*

### Abstract

Mentoring as a means for professional socialization enhances a sense of community, cooperation, and engagement among faculty members. Moreover, mentoring is regarded as one of the essential parts in faculty development and retention, and academic environment. Specifically, mentors can help their mentees in conducting research, writing publications, passing the transition period easily and with less stress. The purpose of this research is to investigate how informal faculty mentoring works in young academics' professional development and teaching career and what effects it has for teacher's career development in Kazakhstani higher education system. The research seeks to examine the role of faculty mentoring as a form of professional growth and socialization where a more experienced faculty member stands as a guide to a less experienced member with the aim of developing and elaborating their skills and abilities, knowledge and cultural understanding of a particular organization or institution. 5 young academics were involved in this research with 1-5 job experiences in higher education. The results of this study show that mentoring is a learning partnership, a process of support, a reciprocal relationship, a dynamic process where a mentor- mentee relationship changes over time.

**Keywords:** informal mentoring, faculty mentoring, professional learning, higher education

### Introduction

Professional development acts as a specially organized and semi-controlled process of adopting a young academic to professional work during the process of forming as a subject of this activity (Akcan, 2016). Familiarizing a newly hired specialist with different aspects of professional work within the community is seen as a process of non-rigid technological management of situations which promotes the formation of young academics' professional orientation, love and interest in the chosen profession, understanding public sense, the value of professional work and at the same time its importance for him/herself personally, conscientious and creative attitude to the chosen professional activity, specifics of professional behavior, professional ethics, competences, individual style, professional stability and reliability. During their initial teaching years, young specialists will either form themselves as competent educators and be successful in their career path or they will fail in teaching and leave the profession (Akcan, 2016). The latter, the problem of teacher attrition, is becoming nowadays significant in the field of teacher education (Sharma & Jyoti, 2009; Shah *et al.*, 2010).

Faculty members are subject to high workload in Kazakhstan since they are required to carry out an excessive amount of administrative tasks and undertake a large number of classroom teaching hours. These demands risk displacing the effort that they need to put into the course planning and student assessment. Gaps in professional development opportunities is another

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\* Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary  
Email: gulsaulek@gmail.com

factor that hinders faculty in advancing their teaching practice and adopting more student- focused approaches that support the acquisition of higher order competencies (OECD, 2017).

The relevance and significance of mentoring is substantiated by the fact that not all beginning young specialists are ready and fully developed to make a start of their professional activities. Therefore, mentors' main goals should be to develop newly hired members' professional interests, to assist them in building their professional knowledge, skills and competences, in improving their proficiency.

One general **research question** was set in this study:

How does informal faculty mentoring work in Kazakhstani higher education institutions?

This general research question was developed into the following sub-questions:

1. How do young academics perceive mentoring/ mentorship?
2. What professional responsibilities and competences are developed in mentor- mentee relationship?
3. What are the challenges of young academics in their early career stage?

### **Mentoring as a means for professional socialization (Overview of the literature on faculty mentoring)**

Many researches dedicated to mentoring put up a struggle for giving an accurately specified definition of mentoring (Dawson, 2014; Haggard *et al.*, 2011; Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Thus, for instance, Berk *et al.* (2005) argue that despite the fact that mentoring has been researched since the mid-1970s there is no strict and thorough accepted definition of it, especially when talking about mentoring in academia. In addition, Berk *et al.* (2005) reported that there are no specific guidelines or criteria to define mentoring relationship or to evaluate mentor's effectiveness. Although, they outlined mentorship relationships as a way

*"that may vary along a continuum from informal/short-term to formal/long-term in which faculty with useful experience, knowledge, skills, and/or wisdom offers advice, information, guidance, support, or opportunity to another faculty member or student for that individual's professional development" and determined such characteristics of a faculty mentor as "expertise, professional integrity, honesty, accessibility, approachability, motivation, respect by peers in field, and supportiveness and encouragement" (Berk et al., 2005, p.67).*

Crisp and Cruz (2009) made an analysis of literature in the field of education, business and psychology and ascertained more than fifty definitions of mentoring which differ in scope and breadth. The authors admit the fact that in the field of education researchers do not provide readers with a detailed and explicit definition of mentoring: "some quantitative studies have also failed to provide a lack of a clear operational definition, despite use of research designs that require a clear definition to properly examine the impact of a mentoring program or intervention on some measure of student success" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.528).

The main characteristics of mentoring, according to Eby, Rhodes and Allen (2007), are that mentoring is a learning partnership, a unique relationship between individuals, a process of support, a reciprocal relationship, a dynamic process where the mentor - mentee relationship changes over time.

Initially, mentoring was offered as a facultative option for supporting novice teachers at schools. Nowadays, as Norman and Ganser (2004) emphasize, mentoring programs are an essential part of a successful certification of beginning faculty members. They acquire a special relevance in connection with the emergence of alternative ways to the pedagogical profession.

- Significant attention in the literature is devoted not only to forms of organization and guiding mentoring, but also to mentor's personal characteristics (Hall *et al.*, 2008; Rose, 2003; Whitaker, 2000). Researchers (Sambunjak, Straus & Marusic, 2010; Bozionelos, 2004) distinguish the following characteristics of a successful mentor:
- personal devotion to another person during a rather long period;
- respect to an individual, his/her abilities and right to make his own choice in life;
- ability to listen to and perceive various points of view;
- ability to empathize in contention with another person;
- ability to see not only obstacles, but also decisions and opportunities;
- flexibility and openness.

The carried out role of mentor gives a chance to develop his/her own human qualities and to promote the increase of his/her mentee's significant professional qualities, the increment of his/her professional competence, therefore, the achievement of high quality in teaching.

Many researchers (Allen, Lentz & Day, 2006; Koch & Johnson, 2000; McKinley, 2004; Jakubik, Eliades & Weese, 2016) emphasize the benefits for mentees as well as for mentors in the mentorship relationships. In their study Huling and Resta (2001), after investigating literature on mentoring, listed a number of advantages which will gain a mentor him/herself in a mentor partnership. According to them, as mentorship is a reciprocal relationship, a mentor updates and improves his/her professional competency, as during the close collaboration with novice teachers they serve as a source of new ideas in terms of teaching techniques, creativity, lesson planning, and sharing new literature. This, in turn, leads to being reflective, as they always analyze, critically give feedback, and deepen their own teaching sensitivity and skill. Mentoring relationships give an opportunity for renewal and regeneration as well as psychological benefits for both parties.

In examining the relationships in mentoring in higher education, Lechuga (2011) differentiated three main categories of faculty mentoring: faculty - undergraduate student mentoring, faculty - graduate student mentoring, and mentoring among faculty members.

In terms of faculty-to-faculty mentor relationships Sands, Parson and Duane (1991) characterized a mentor as "a person who serves as a guide or sponsor, that is, a person who looks after, advises, protects, and takes a special interest in another's development" (p.175) and depicted four more supplementary roles for mentors: sponsor, coach, role model, and counselor.

In their study, Zellers, Howard, and Barcic (2008) delineated mentoring as "a reciprocal learning relationship characterized by trust, respect, and commitment, in which a mentor supports the professional and personal development of another by sharing his or her life experiences, influence, and expertise" (p.555). The researchers maintain that the essence of mentoring in education, specifically in higher education, stands apart from that in business sector. The point at issue is that business sectors elucidate themselves as learning organizations whereas higher education sees this aspect as alternate one and designates the mentors and their mentees as the community of learners. Despite this this difference of meaning of mentoring in education and business, the benefits of the mentor relationships are identical in both types of organizations: the increase of productivity and organizational

stability, socialization and communication, the confinement of skilled and experienced workers, the support of cultural diversity, improved leadership capacity and succession learning, and cost-effectiveness (Zellers *et al.*, 2008, p.557).

The examination of mentor relationships manifests its changing nature. Zellers *et al.* (2008) perceive mentoring as a process of partnership where each participant derives more benefits "in the two-way transfer of information and skills, fluidly reversing the roles of mentor and mentee as warranted by the experiences each brings to the relationship" (p.563).

Mentoring is sensitive to the questions of race and gender at the faculty and universities in general (Holmes, Land & Hinton-Hudson, 2007; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005; Tillman, 2001). Thus, Stanley and Lincoln (2005) conceive mentoring as an advantageous method in faculty and as a way "to escape from isolation" (p.45). Zellers *et al.* (2008) likewise strongly believe that rewarding mentoring relationships should rely on trust, honesty, willingness to learn from each participant, and the ability to share power and privilege. Mentoring plays a crucial role in building good relationships with faculty members. Stanley and Lincoln (2005) also suggest some guidelines for making mentor relationships more successful and effective: sensitivity, awareness of race, gender or ethnicity, relationships are reciprocal, efforts from both parties, etc.

Wasburn and LaLopa (2003) in their study reported that there are two main problems for the necessity of implementing formal faculty mentoring programs. The first problem is concerned with individual academicians as they pursue promotion, tenure, and appointments of various kinds, increasing salary, and professional recognition. Second, there is a huge gap between the theory and practice taught at the universities, the quality of teaching is getting worse. The main reason is that universities try to make focus greatly on the research part of it, i.e. striving to get higher rankings through publications and grants. The authors found that most of the faculty mentoring programs exist across departmental lines.

Modern education reforms have changed higher education in many respects. The problem of forming a future specialist's identity focused to be an active participant in reproducing cultural capacity of the country is gaining special importance. The formation of the future specialist's identity is characterized considerably by his/her professionalism level, reflecting objective preparedness and subjective readiness to solve professional tasks and to analyze his/her own activities (Lebedeva *et al.*, 2016).

Young academics in their early career stages need to know what is expected from them (Deane Sorcinelli, 2002). At the first steps of professional development a young academic faces certain problems such as failure in accurately managing time at work and logically developing the sequence of lesson parts, difficulties in explaining new material to students, lack of mutual understanding with colleagues and students. A young academic needs to adapt to the new staff, adjust mutual understanding with his/ her students, to be able to discuss properly the topics of the classes, to seek how to increase students' interest in the taught subject (Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002; Harrison & McKeon, 2008; Van Velzen *et al.*, 2010).

In this regard, mentoring has a crucial role in terms of what mentors contribute in young academics' induction process, how they influence the identity formation of newly hired faculty member, how staff members work together and share their experiences, in so doing fostering their professional learning and growth (Angelique, Kyle & Taylor, 2002; Van Velzen *et al.*, 2010).

## Methodology

To address the research question, a qualitative method was used, in particular, interviews.

A semi-structured interview, as one of the most effective appropriate means to collect data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), is a very convenient method, with prepared, but not fixed set of questions. Follow-up questions can be asked during the interview for

a deeper understanding of the topic. That is why semi-structured interview is "flexible, accessible and intelligible and, more important, capable of disclosing important and often hidden facets of human and organizational behavior" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.246).

The sampling was purposeful, including snowballing method, which allowed to make an elaborate and in-depth analysis of the questions under discussion.

Participants of the study were 5 young academics with 0-5 job experiences in the field of higher education and currently working at Sh.Ualikhanov Kokshetau State University which is considered as one of the oldest universities in the northern part of Kazakhstan with its rich history. All five beginning academics had Master's degrees in their specialties.

Four interviews were conducted in English, the fifth teacher preferred to give the interview in Russian:

**Table 1.** Information about junior faculty members participated in the interviews

<b>General information</b>	<b>Teaching experience</b>	<b>Workplace (faculty)</b>
<b>Young academic 1</b> Female Kazakh Age: 28	Two months	Department of English Language and Teaching Methodology
<b>Young academic 2</b> Female Kazakh Age: 26	2 years	Department of English Language and Teaching Methodology
<b>Young academic 3</b> Female Kazakh Age: 31	5 years	Department of English Language and Teaching Methodology
<b>Young academic 4</b> Female Kazakh Age: 27	2 years	Department of Foreign Languages
<b>Young academic 5</b> Female Kazakh Age:27	1 year	Faculty of Economics

The semi-structured one-to-one interviews, lasting 30-35 minutes, began with the questions to evolve the interviewee's initial interest in science, and they included general questions that targeted the young academics' personal experiences in their induction period, teaching experiences as well as their formal and informal professional development and learning. The interview questions are designed to get an in-depth picture about the topic under discussion, in particular, the interviewee's perception of mentoring at the university, mentor's qualities and competencies.

A basic interview guide was used; however, the conversations which were informal in nature allowed the beginning academics to take the conversations in different directions given their own experiences. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for further coding and analysis.

## Results and Discussion

In general, mentoring is perceived by newly hired junior members as the process of facilitation of young academics directed to accelerated mastering of a new profession or ability, reduction of stress during the transition period, improvement of executing instructions by new teachers by means of mentor-teacher and socialization of young academics in teacher's professions (Podsen & Denmark, 2013).

All five interviewees acknowledged that mentoring is mostly important in the induction period, as emphasized one of the interviewees "during a stressful period". Thus, the interviewee 1 says, "...for me it [mentoring] means first of all support, help, being helped in difficult situations and supporting you throughout your induction period when you start to work. I think, it's very important to have a person whom you can ask about things, about how the things work and are structured". The interviewee 3 emphasizes that "It [mentoring] is crucial because mentoring is showing assistance and support to the people who need it at the beginning of a career or study". However, the fifth participant stated that one can manage without a mentor in one's early transition period and if one needs help, he/she can just approach a colleague for help.

The induction period of beginning academics in higher education, as noticed from the interviews, develops differently in terms of its degree of quickness and success. During their transition period, junior faculty highlighted the pitfalls which they faced in the adaptation period, such as insufficiency in practical knowledge and skills focused in their sphere of profession, difficulties in filling the needed documents, in managing time correctly, in disparagement of work load, difficulties in mutual understanding with their students, etc.

Thus, the adaptation of a beginning specialist is a mechanism of a flexible realignment to the changing conditions of the environment as well as purposefully acquiring the norms of collective professional communication, organizational knowledge and keeping the organizational traditions. Here, beginning worker's motivation plays a crucial and significant role which can positively affect his/her colleagues as well as advantageously impact the organization in general. We can conclude from the conversations with the interviewees that the staff should be motivated in the right direction as the quality and quantity of the performed work profoundly depends on it.

In the course of the conversations, it was elicited that the mentees, being in informal mentorship relationships, received a different kind of support. In literature, Tillman (2001) delineated two particular functions of a mentor: career functions and psychosocial functions. The former allocates mentee's preparation for career promotion and this function includes such elements as protection, coaching and sponsorship. To illustrate this from the interviews: "*assistance of teachers, help of senior teachers to*

youngsters [novice academics]", "I think anyone who wants to be successful whether in life or at work, needs a mentor who can look up and follow you because a mentor is a person who is more experienced, who is more knowledgeable and successful than you. Consequently, he is the one who can help you to understand the environment around and how to deal with the circumstances. He can be your advisor, supporter and encourager in challenging situations. He can help you to advance in your career". On the other hand, the latter increases mentee's sense of competence, identity, and work- role effectiveness. This combine role modeling, acceptance, confirmation, and counseling (Tillman, 2001).

A high degree of changeability in the professional environment determines the approach of professional competence as the process developing in time. In a particular moment professional competence of a teacher educator, being put together with the work environment and its requirements, carry a definite value and level. It is essential not only to reach a definite and prescribed level of professional competence, but also to attain its stability despite the environmental changes. It will be possible only if these competences are developed continuously as a result of the effective use of personal potential.

Competences represent a resource which an individual uses to achieve the stability of his/her professional competences. Apart from developing career and psychosocial function, mentoring fosters the expansion of particular competences. The interviewees were all positive about having informal mentorship and mentioned during the conversations the following competences developed through mentoring relationships:

- communicative skills (interviewee 1: "The things should be talked about, first of all. It brings confidence, so you are not afraid to ask for help");
- flexibility;
- well-organized self-study;
- team-building;
- interpersonal skills;
- "spiritual competences like confidence, diligence, mutual trust and good fellowship" (interviewee 4);

For a young new teacher educator, it is very hard to start working, since "no one gives you a manual on what to do. You teach in isolation" (Garvis, 2012, p.298) and it's often "filled with tension" (Garvis, 2012, p.300). To begin with, in the education system of higher education in Kazakhstan, teachers have to complete multiple tasks. Thus, for instance:

- the main task is *teaching*: each subject needs to have a complex of materials which consists of a syllabus, teaching materials, didactical materials, references, individual and group tasks for students, materials for mid-term and final exams, tests with multiple choice items, etc.
- apart from teaching, teachers work as *researchers*. At the beginning of each academic year, teachers fill in an individual plan where s/he plans what to do in terms of making research: to publish at least three articles, to participate in different kinds of conferences, workshops, and seminars, to organize one workshop or seminar at the faculty for the staff, to be a supervisor, etc.
- each experienced educator is a *curator* or a *coordinator*, s/he has several groups under his/ her responsibility which means that teacher educators carry out the following tasks: to fill in the journal which contains information, such as general information about the student (the place of birth, date of birth, his/her address), information about each

student's parents, information about students' achievements in education and sport, to have regular meetings with parents, to have regular meetings with students themselves, to involve students in organizing different cultural events, to go out together with students in cleaning up the territory of the university, etc.

Definitely, for a new beginning academic to have all these multiple roles and to find a balance between them is difficult, as they are all the time overloaded with these tasks. What is more, the lack of time is found to be crucial at the very early stage of novices. One interviewed teacher mentioned, "*A job is new to you and you need to learn it, how to fulfill it, there are a lot of things that you do over your job, you need to be really organized. So the lack of time is the main difficulty*". Another interviewee noted that "*though I have already had one-year experience at school, being a teacher at the university turned out to be a bit different, in terms of documentation and working conditions. Through the first week I was overloaded, I had to process a lot of information in my mind, settling to a new environment*".

## Limitations

The number of the interviewees was limited: just five beginner teachers from one university in Kazakhstan. This does not enable to make far-going conclusions, for which further, larger-scale

Research is necessary.

## Conclusion

Nowadays teaching is becoming exciting, rewarding, and uplifting (Parkay, 2013). Teacher roles involve interpreting, but not mere translation of information; communicating, not mere informing; moderating; facilitating – actively assisting in terms of self-education; tutoring – consulting; managing; initiating educational actions, generating ideas, and coordinating common efforts. But this is also very challenging, especially for beginner teachers.

The strategy of training future teachers in the conditions of formal, non-formal and informal education is directed on: getting a high quality in education which gives an opportunity to create professional competences necessary for practical activities of a teacher, acquisition of strong skills which increase graduates' competitiveness and promote the development of their professional career (Richter *et al.*, 2011; Hendrix *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, one of the central aims evolving with the implementation of new state educational reforms in Kazakhstan is to advance the level of the personnel capacity and professionalism of employees working in higher education. However, the present system of preparation of pedagogical staff education programmes and technology of training academics for working in higher education institutions do not enable beginner teachers to cope with the tasks, as noted in OECD document: "The lack of national standards for teachers - an important element of professionalisation - presents an obstacle to high and consistent quality in initial and continuous teacher education in Kazakhstan" (OECD, 2017, p.98).

Professional socialization of a newly hired specialists is indispensable. Besides the professional knowledge, they need to get accustomed to a new social circle, to organization's traditions and fully developed norms as well as to the new forms of educational management. Though all participants of the survey experienced elements of informal faculty mentoring, they highlighted that it is crucial to implement formal faculty mentoring programmes, since it is a good opportunity for a young academic to learn and



discover together with a mentor all the necessary components of the professional activity, mainly its purpose, subject, approaches and techniques, results and outcomes, conditions in the field of this profession.

It is only through research that the essential parts and components of the needs can be disclosed, discovered and developed. The findings of the study show that there is a need to implement formal faculty mentoring programmes for young academics' professional growth and socialization, for job satisfaction and teacher retention. In one of the interviewee's words, "to be mentored means you can just be *successful* and *satisfied* with your job".

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