

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC MENTORING IN BUILDING SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: *International cooperation, digitalization, human diversity are social trends imposing new demands on universities to be more open to society and become catalysts of social transformation. EUA education policy documents have underlined the expectations that the European universities in 2030 should be “Open”, transformative and transnational; Sustainable, diverse and engaged; Strong, autonomous and accountable” institutions. To attain these goals, universities have to engage in a reform of academic careers. The premise of this paper is that developing a mentoring culture on university campuses would contribute to the growth of the academic community (from students to staff and faculty). In particular, we argue that a multi-faceted model of academic mentoring that includes forms like reverse mentoring and network mentoring, centered on the needs of university professors, should be viewed as a solution for reforming university careers and creating inclusive and sustainable universities.*

Key words: *sustainable university, human capital development, academic mentoring, reverse mentoring, network mentoring.*

1. Introduction

Social trends shaping modern society such as international cooperation, digitalization, human diversity are imposing new demands on universities to become more open to societal needs (EUA, 2023), demonstrate innovation in fostering new forms of learning (OECD, 2015) and engage in reforming the university careers (EUA, 2021). The latter point is the most important because ultimately the university personnel is the one assuming an active role to connect the ‘ivory tower’ with the needs and goals of the nations they serve.

Boyer’s (1990) seminal work in higher education advocated for a complex model of academic careers. His notion of ‘scholarship reconsidered’ is still relevant today in the ways universities have institutionalized the research, teaching and service missions of the professoriate (Moore & Ward, 2010). However, in light of this complexity, Rice (2002) has recognized that “our conception of scholarly excellence has become

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multidimensional” (p. 16) which may create uncertainty and stress among scholars, especially the junior faculty (Price & Cotton, 2006). Some argue that support for academic careers should come from within organizations with faculty members engaging in professional development to advance their scholarship and manage the broad arrays of scholarly activities. For instance, Houdyshell et al. (2022) provided an example of professional learning communities (PLCs) expected to “reestablish Boyer’s model as the governing philosophy of the college in the minds of veteran faculty as well as to introduce Boyer’s model to new faculty” (p.114). Although such initiatives have not always been successful in building collaborations, fostering beneficial interactions among colleagues or contributing to career growth, the message would be that faculty members have to be creative in supporting their profession.

This perspective is aligned with a major priority of the European University Association [EUA] (2021) calling for a reform of university careers in sustainable, diverse and engaged environments. This vision requires a “coordinated approach” among policy makers, funding agencies, university leadership, faculty, staff, and students. The EUA document emphasizes the parity between research and teaching, and a holistic and broader evaluation of academic careers. Research and innovation are key to building sustainable universities and amplifying their impact on society (EUA, 2023). At the core of the process are the individual academic careers that flourish within “robust, diverse and collaborative cultures” (p.5).

The EUA has a clear message that only an inclusive university environment can provide support and encouragement to all academics in their disciplinary journeys. We argue in this paper that academic mentoring, as collegial support and sharing experience among faculty members, is not only beneficial to all parties involved, but moreover, creates an effervescent collaborative culture on university campuses.

2. Academic Careers in European Universities

The structure and mission of higher education systems are carefully designed to ensure the growth of human capital (Bilan, et al., 2020; Zgaga, 2012). Altbach et al. (2009) contend that global trends such as modernization and internationalization of higher education institutions have open new opportunities to students and professors. In Europe, national universities have made incredible progress integrating the Bologna Process principles which bring structures, programs, and curricula in line with common standards, to ensure the academic mobility and growth of students and faculty (Curaj et al., 2015; 2018). In particular, European and national associations and institutions have created policy and practice frameworks to support the reform of university careers.

2.1. Policy background

Universities play a unique role in the transformation of individuals, institutions and societies by embedding principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the curriculum, helping graduates understand the sustainability context of their disciplines, but also supporting the academic staff to gain ESD competencies to transfer to students

(Price et al., 2021). To achieve these goals, EUA (2021) envisions universities without walls, capable to contribute to the sustainable development of nations, by uniquely responding to their “missions of learning and teaching, research, innovation and culture” (p.7). Sustainable development requires diversity in backgrounds, ideas, cultures, leadership and institutional profiles, but also social cohesion to attain common goals as promised by the United Nations [UN] (n.d.). Among the UN sustainable development goals, Quality Education is critical to breaking from the cycle of poverty, reducing inequalities, embracing digital transformation, and overall fostering tolerance and peace between people and societies. From developing sustainable Research & Innovation agenda (EUA, 2023) through collaborations and partnerships, to including more research experiences into higher education programs, and prioritizing the third mission of service to society, the EUA universities are redefining their traditional image of an “ivory tower” by engaging with the real-world problems of society (Adamuti-Trache & Hyle, 2015; Boyer, 1990; Martin et al., 2005).

The social cohesion among and within European universities as a condition to attain the sustainable development goals, requires the participation and active contribution of all members of a university: faculty, staff, students and administrators. Leišytė et al. (2021) promote “an inclusive university where various types of diversity are celebrated and supported without discrimination or stigmatisation, enabling opportunities for all” (p. 1), while recognizing the “multi-level” and “multi-faceted” challenges of “developing and sustaining inclusion” in higher education. Nevertheless, EUA’s (2021, 2023) policy documents express a firm belief that inclusive sustainability can be achieved by reforming the academic careers to encourage and support professors be actively and innovatively involved in research, teaching and service, in the spirit of Boyer’s (1990) concept of “scholarship reconsidered”.

2.2. Academic careers: Demands and opportunities

The EUA (2020) strategic plan reaffirms the values adopted by the European universities in their quest to ensure excellence in the service to society. “Academic freedom, institutional autonomy, freedom of speech, integrity, inclusivity, diversity, equality and equity, sustainability, solidarity, promotion of creativity and critical thinking” (p.4) are milestones to building academic careers. In addition, the reform of academic careers in European universities is a priority for EUA (2021). First, it enables a model that goes beyond traditional bibliometric indicators by “using a broader set of evaluation practices for academic careers” (EUA, 2021, p.12). This model may give an opening to faculty to set up their own agendas in identifying what counts to their professional growth and what contributions they make to society. Second, reforming suggests different career paths, with varying degrees of research and teaching contributions should have comparable value. Third, other innovative activities like “citizen science, dissemination, supervision and mentoring” (EUA, 2021, p.12) should be considered impactful as long as they retain the research component and contribute to the expansion of human knowledge. In theory, there is a high level of freedom and flexibility in defining one’s academic career that should stimulate innovation and make

academic careers more attractive. However, institutional and societal structures should also be flexible and allow to easily “switch jobs between academia and other sectors, such as start-ups, industry or public administration” (EUA, 2021, p. 12) as to ensure a two-way transfer of experience with outside academia.

The EUA model of reformed academic careers is aligned to Boyer’s (1990) four pillars that describe the primary work of the professoriate: discovery, integration, application and teaching. While the scholarship of discovery expands human knowledge, the scholarship of integration brings isolated facts together to create new disciplines and areas on inquiry. Boyer asked scholars to make a commitment to use knowledge for the benefit of communities and society, and identify social problems that need to be scholarly investigated, through the scholarship of application later called engagement (Boyer, 2016). Further, faculty as teachers and learners transmit, transform and extend knowledge to students and other stakeholders as part of the scholarship of teaching. Similarly, EUA’s (2023) R&I agenda promotes “the opportunities of multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary R&I”(p.12) and recommends the exchange of good practices among EUA members. Meanwhile, “universities must support civic values through active engagement” of academics in public debates and societal projects that offer opportunities for “continuous reflection on European identity and culture, as well as their contribution to a global world” (EUA, 2021, p. 12).

2.3. Institutional expectations and support

A harsh truth about working in European universities is reflected in the statement: “Academic careers are complex, diverse, and increasingly competitive” (Mantai & Marrone, 2023, p. 797). Competition is present along each step in a career (Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2015) “from doctoral and postdoctoral to junior academic and senior academic positions” (p. 41), being related to both employment and obtaining research funding. Debowski’s (2022) account on career stages presents the early career phase that requires resilience to become independent and confident scholars; midcareer academics taking up more formal governance and leadership roles that create opportunities to build visible identities in research, teaching and service; while senior academics have built a stronger presence as leaders in their field and are expected to provide guidance to junior staff and also assume leadership roles in their discipline, profession, and community at large. This account may suggest that academics are part of a sustainable professional community, with roles of faculty members well defined along the academic career progression.

However, the volatility and uncertainty of the higher education sector have generated “an escalating focus on academic performance despite workload intensification, and employment precarity for many” (Debowski, 2022, p. 7). As a result, across all academic career stages, academics are challenged to pursue a more sophisticated and integrated plan of roles, outcomes and interactions, and to increase their visibility as “a talented member of the academy” (p. 12). Although university professors are proud to claim that “Academe is a constant journey of growth and transformation” (p. 13), support from colleagues, institution and the professional community is needed to attain continuous

academic success. Training activities for enhancing teaching, support for digital transformation, international research exchanges, are some support areas reported by European universities (EUA, 2024). Although in many cases, support of academics is coming directly from colleagues through informal mentoring (Debowski, 2022; Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2015), the institutions should promote a culture of collegial support and collaboration on university campuses.

3. Academic mentoring as a strategy to reform university careers

Academic mentoring is one of the most cherished traditions that support success in an academic career. The advice and encouragement of colleagues who have experienced similar challenges are important to the novice faculty member, who is either a junior starting an academic career, or someone facing a career change. However, considering the complex demands of academic careers and the specific expectations of universities already engaged in a competition for resources and reputation, academics learn how to function in a new workplace or a changing environment while performing their jobs. Researchers and practitioners contend that the training of academic staff for the multiple roles and responsibilities they have to carry out effectively and creatively, continuously adapting to the increase in demands from the professional community or society at large, can be achieved through a practical form of learning which is academic mentoring. The concept of mentoring in education is supported by theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), or coaching models like the GROW four-step system for setting and achieving goals (Whitemore, 2009). All these theories stress out the role of learner's experiences as the starting point in a cycle of reflection, conceptualization and experimentation for personal and professional development. The role of the academic mentor is undoubtedly crucial in this journey of personalized and sustainable learning.

3.1. Mentoring: Building new meanings

Mentoring is not a new concept. The term "mentor" originates from the antique Greek Mentor legend that comes from Homer's *Odyssey*. Mentor was a friend of Odysseus trusted to watch over and advise his son Telemachus, in his absence during the Trojan War. The legend led to the traditional meaning of mentoring by an older, more experienced person who gives advice to someone who is a novice. According to Jacobbi (1991) mentoring was used extensively as a practice in workplace settings to train newcomers gain skills and achieve success in a new area of work.

The concept of mentoring in higher education is used to describe either relationships with students or among academic staff. The focus of this paper is on academic mentoring as related to faculty development and career growth. A systematic literature review on mentoring in higher education from 1990 until 2007 (Nuis et al., 2023) shows that mentoring has been defined in more than 50 different ways, varying in breadth and scope. For instance, Kram's definition (1985) of peer mentoring indicates a helping relationship between two individuals of similar age and/or experience who join their

efforts in the pursuit of some career-related objectives. Even if there is still no consensus on a definition of mentoring, recent studies (e.g., Gershenfeld, 2014) propose that researchers, policymakers and practitioners should take a more practical approach and focus on examining the characteristics of the mentor, the mentoring process, the mentoring relationships, the type of support given by the mentor and/or the institution, the duration and frequency of mentor-mentee interactions.

Although nobody can argue against academic mentoring and its relevance for career growth, the traditional definition of mentoring that has been in use for a long time, has also led to interpretations and stereotypes that may limit the utility of the concept. A constructive use of the idea of mentoring as a way to develop professional competences, transfer knowledge, skills and even values in a concrete context, requires first to eliminate existing misconceptions (CEDEFOP, 2013). Therefore, before aiming at exploring new meanings of the mentoring concept, we will briefly comment on the current stereotypes that are related to the traditional idea of mentoring.

First, there is a well-spread belief that “The mentor is older than the mentee” (CEDEFOP, 2013) which is an outdated idea because age is no longer associated with competence. Second, the belief that “Mentoring relationships are naturally blossoming relationships” may suggest they can happen “by default” without intentional and clear planning of goals. Similarly, the notion that “Mentoring deals only with personal problems or has no limitations” appears to be unrealistic in today’s academic world which is very competitive.

Third, some stereotypes misinterpret the nature of the process. “Mentoring is a time-consuming process”, or “Mentoring is a one-way process”, or “Mentoring is a face-to-face process” are statements that do not reflect the realities of today’s academia in which interactions are intentional, planned and focused.

Finally, “A mentor has potential to exert power on the mentee” describes an outdated model in which the right to speak and make decisions comes with age, experience and social recognition. Universities are governed by the principle of academic freedom which includes freedom of inquiry and pursuit of knowledge wherever it may lead, without unreasonable interference. Although a mentor must be a model of critical thinker and an inspiration for the mentees, the mentor cannot take control of their journeys.

Therefore, the new meanings of mentoring should be associated with the current realities of the academic world, and the evolution of a society with both needs and opportunities. This reality should place academic mentoring in a new light by identifying all stakeholders that could be involved in the process of faculty development and career growth, no more limited just to the duo mentor-mentee.

3.2. Academic mentoring: Challenges and opportunities

In his argument about the importance of academic mentoring, Johnson (2016) observes that “deliberate and thoughtful mentoring is one of the most important and enduring roles for the higher education faculty member” (p. 3). Yet, there is a gap between theory and practice because “the processes and procedures for building mentoring relationships are poorly developed, understudied and focused mainly on

teaching competences.” (p. 4). On the other hand, policy documents remind universities about the need to change and respond to social trends such as digitalization, diversity and inclusion, internationalization, sustainable development, labor market dynamics (EUA 2021, 2024) that may require reforming academic careers.

Therefore, new forms of mentoring should be considered. For example, reverse mentoring is a type of mentoring that responds to both intergenerational diversity and gaining digitalization competences. “Reverse mentoring is also used to alleviate the social isolation of older adults and increase their sense of self efficacy as they build their confidence in technological use” (Chaudhuri et al., 2021, p. 475). Recent studies on Generation Z (Bonchis, 2021; Elmore, 2023) show that young people are extensively using technology and capable of interpreting images quickly, so a young Generation Z person can serve as a mentor to an older one who may not have the same level of digital skills.

Another example is on-line mentoring which is useful in international collaboration contexts. As the mentoring relationship is often subject to the constraints of distance and time, the use of technology may offer certain advantages. Other forms of mentoring such as peer-mentoring, team-mentoring or network mentoring, all have benefits that involve the development of transversal competences (critical thinking, communication, self-regulation, self-monitored learning, cooperation in international teams), and could contribute to the advancement of sustainable academic careers.

These examples suggest that mentoring should be redefined as a multi-facet complex process that includes many types of mentoring (e.g., on-line or face-to-face, peer-mentoring and network-mentoring) and involves more people, aiming primarily at the professional development of mentees. Not surprising, an analysis of the definitions of mentoring over the last two decades and the descriptions of the process has revealed a holistic view of mentoring. Moreover, Nuis et al. (2023) observe the complex support needed by the mentee in various areas that include academic, career, emotional, psychosocial, psychological aspects, to promote and facilitate development and success.

Network mentoring in particular is one of the most successful approaches that support the development of a complex profile of the university professor (Sorcineli & Yun, 2007). Robust networks are engaging multiple “mentoring partners” in partnerships “to address specific areas of faculty activity, such as research, teaching, working towards tenure, and striking a balance between work and life” (p. 58). The main advantage of network mentoring resides in the enhanced benefits that both mentor and mentee have by growing their careers in parallel, teaching and learning from each other, sharing their experiences and circles of collaborators (often from different generations of scholars), and thus enlarging their professional network while contributing to the career growth of their inter-linked careers.

3.3. Network mentoring as the basis for building a culture of mentoring

The various forms of academic mentoring (Johnson, 2016; Voinea, 2024) from traditional mentoring to network mentoring provide benefits to mentees, mentors and higher education institutions. As Johnson (2016) summarizes, the mentee receives insights on how to enhance research and teaching productivity, to acquire new

professional skills, become more confident professionally and develop an identity in their areas of expertise, learn how to reduce stress and address conflict. Moreover, mentees enhance their professional networks which helps in gaining initial employment. Mentors are personally rewarded by the mentees' accomplishments, but may also experience professional rejuvenation and motivation to remain current. They gain new friends and recognition for talent development. There is always a creative synergy associated with the academic mentoring relationship that benefits also the university which gains more reputation and opportunity to enlarge their networks. One can expect more productive and happy employees, "stronger organizational commitment, reduced turnover, a stronger record of developing junior talent, and a loyal group of alumni and faculty" (Johnson, 2016, p.13). Networking is a common benefit for faculty members and institutions which is not surprising in a global society and moreover, it corresponds to the internationalization of higher education trend (Altbach et al., 2009).

Therefore, network mentoring may be a proper form of academic mentoring to use as a basis for building a culture of mentoring. First, the literature on mentoring (Zhou et al., 2009) underlines that a single person (the mentor) cannot meet the complex needs of a mentee in today's academia. Second, in any sector but particularly in the academic world, the valorization of human capital requires social capital which is often provided by the mentor's network and/or partnerships initiated at the university level. Thus, the university has an active role in facilitating the intertwining of these networks by establishing on campus a mentoring culture based on collaboration and support. This new perspective allows to move from the traditional, quite static and limited view of mentoring, to a broader and dynamic interactive model based on a multiplicity of role models and values, as well as diversity of mentors' competences. It is this diversity that creates a genuine mentoring culture so much needed in today's university.

4. Model of Academic mentoring

The literature on academic mentoring reveals that the traditional notion of mentoring built on the direct interaction between the mentee (i.e., a novice academic in a particular area) and the mentor (i.e., a more experienced colleague willing to share experience and provide support) is still viable (Chaudhuri et al., 2021; Debowski, 2022; Janasz, et al., 2003; Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2015; Satterly, et al., 2018; Voinea, 2024). Without this mentorship core, it is impossible to achieve the goal of enhancing skills, competencies, transferring knowledge and overall creating a bonding relationship (Johnson, 2016; Norman, 2022). However, the academic mentoring models in the 21st century have to take into account the complexity of the academic life, the dynamics of institutions and individual careers, and the effects of social, political, economic and cultural contexts in rapidly changing higher education systems (Lumpkin, 2011; Philips & Dennison, 2015). An academic mentoring model should include components that reflect a multi-faceted process but is built on Boyer's (1990) idea of "scholarship reconsidered". Although the network mentoring appears to be a successful candidate in a hierarchy of approaches, we believe the duo mentor-mentee and their outside professional circles are not sufficient in promoting consistent and continuous career growth. The mentor-

mentee duo and the mentoring relationship need to be incorporated and aligned with the institutional structures, with university's values and set of norms that recognize and provide additional rewards to mentoring.

Therefore, we propose an academic mentoring model based on the triad mentee/mentor/institution shaped by the campus culture and external contexts (Figure 1). First, we argue that the mentee-mentor relationship should remain the core of an academic mentoring model. Second, this form of collegial relationship should receive a professional recognition and value by the university. Third, the multitude of mentee-mentor experiences should be shared as to build a mentoring culture on university campuses. Finally, this model should remain dynamic as to rapidly respond to policy demands, practice innovations, societal needs within the national and European contexts affected by global economic, social, cultural and political trends. More important, a dynamic model grounded in the mentee-mentor relationship, should not exclude the consideration of other specific forms of mentoring (e.g., peer mentoring, group mentoring, multiple mentoring, reverse mentoring, network mentoring, etc.) to respond to the changing needs of academics. We contend this multi-faceted dynamic model is beneficial to mentees, mentors and institutions, and build healthy campus cultures in which mentoring is one aspect of human development responsive to the broader societal contexts.

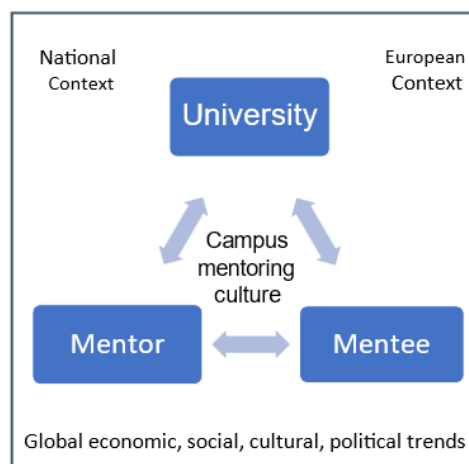


Fig. 1. *Academic Mentoring Model*

5. Conclusion

In summary, regardless of whether the mentee faculty receives support from only one or more mentors, and regardless of their relative ages or areas of competence, the mentorship relationship represents a professional and human interaction cherished by those involved. The macro context and the higher education institution in which the academic mentoring occurs are important vehicles that give some direction and/or nurture the relationship by promoting a culture of mentoring and collegial support. We conclude with a quote that highlights the humanity of the mentoring ideal: "...It is more

than passing interest that the original Mentor was inhabited by Athena. Clearly, the mentor is concerned with the transmission of wisdom. How, then, do mentors transmit wisdom? Most often, it seems, they take us on a journey. In this aspect of their work, mentors are guides. They lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way. There is a certain luminosity about them, and they often pose as magicians in tales of transformation” (Daloz, 1999 as cited in Fornari, 2022).

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