

Mentoring in a Diversified Culture: Qualitative Perspective

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Abstract

The current research stress on mentoring in higher education institutions (HEIs) with diversified academic cultures. It stresses the activities of mentoring in academia practices. The experience of 55 academics were utilized, via one-to-one interview, to answer two research questions i.e. “*how to exercise mentoring tools in a diversified higher education context? and what are the conducted mentoring activities in academia life*”. In Bahraini context, the current research has been conducted to get answers for previously mentioned research questions..

Keywords: *mentoring activities, higher education institutions (HEIs), & culture diversity.*

1. Introduction

Mentoring is a developmental relationship between a junior, less experience, and newly hired individual, and senior ones with accumulated experience (Ragins and Kram, 2007). In higher education institutions (HEIs) and by adopting the system approach, the education and learning service inputs could be centered around manpower (staff members and students), management, materials, money, and machines (5M's). These inputs are used to create institutions' capabilities and competitive edges (Lotayif, 2021). In particular, manpower is a crucial factor in service industry in general, and in education industry in particular. The interaction between service provider i.e.

the staff member and students shapes, to large extent, the level of delivered education quality. Consequently, developing the required mentoring skills and competences for each university's instructor could be seen a vital competitive edge in this industry.

In Middle East context, there are lack of researches investigating mentoring relationships and activities in diversified cultures. Frances (2014) claiming that cultural issues have a powerful influence on the failure and success of mentoring programs and relationships and there is scant research on this area and little in guidelines that practitioners can use to help

assure mentoring success. Tareef (2020) claiming that examples of successful mentoring models are less in education compared with business units. More recently, Dianne (2020) claiming that scholars are calling for mentoring that is more fluid, flexible, and responsive to the needs of diverse groups of individuals, whether culturally inter-generationally diverse.

Consequently, the current research seeks answers for two questions, which are *“how to exercise mentoring activities in a diversified higher education context? and what are the conducted mentoring activities in academia life”*. In Bahraini context, the current research has been conducted. Therefore, the related literature of mentoring in HEIs is examined in this perspective then presenting research’ results followed by conclusions and recommendations in Bahrain’s context.

2. Literature review

Generally, Human development topic has been crucial and key element in organizational success since long time ago (Tareef, 2020). Mentoring in higher education could be centered on two practices: instructor(mentor)-students (mentee)(I-S) and instructor(mentor)-colleague (mentee) (I-C) relationships. Only, the latter mentoring relationships will be addressed in the current study. It worth mentioning that the former

describes the daily interactions with students in teaching, assessing and learning activities. Elaine and Charles, (1992) addressed the benefits from that healthy inactions like empowering students and remain them enrolled within the university, as they get psychological comfort.

In I-C mentoring relationship, a more experienced professional serving as a supportive and guiding role model for another professional (Tareef, 2020).Kathy (2016) classified mentoring into formal and informal and stressed its importance in filling a unique niche in the field of adult education. More specifically and in academia life, junior staff members get significant portion of their experience from senior ones. That interaction happens in day-to-day relations and leads to career development, which perceives as crucial factor for sustaining staff member’s vitality (Hynes, 1984).Fowler, (1982) claimed that career development and advancement are believed to be influenced by a variety of personal *characteristics, environmental, and organizational* factors. Indeed, the *organizational* importance of mentoring and coaching in higher education institutions has become more obvious, as occasions and frequencies of colleagues’ interaction times are getting longer and diversified. As determined in moderation, scientific, and teaching

policies, they are interacted in exam times, in exam moderating periods, in academic meetings, in workshops and training sermonizes (i.e. formal), and even in day-to-day routine works (i.e. informal). Therefore, there are enormous formal and informal opportunities for inspiring, influencing, and mentoring other academics behaviors. Adding to that, learning activities could be viewed as a social rather than individual process (Hazel, 2014) and mentoring has become almost a new mantra for education (Sundli, 2007). In addition, Patton, (2017) argued about the importance of mentoring for career growth, especially whenever employees become more entrepreneurial. Personal *characteristics* play a vital role in mentoring activities if skills like cooperative mode, team spirit, flexibility, built-in keen to learn desire, and high loyalty level coupled with superiority of university interests over individual interests are existed amongst the vast majority of staff members. Finally, *environmental* factors like staff-members offices' layout and equipment, existence of appropriate space for interactions like what so called "common staff rooms with pigeon holes", and virtual connection software help enhance the level of mentoring activities in academia life. Fransen *et al.*, (2011); and Mathieu, *et al.*, (2008) did define teamwork orientation as the extent to which members have a positive attitude toward working in a team in

which "we" instead of "I" ought to prevail.

Having said that, mentoring process aims at the development of staff members via assistance with professional and career development, peer learning, and active and problem-based learning tools (e.g. Crisp and Cruz 2009; Brockbank and McGill 2007; and Falchikov 2002). Tareef, (2020) did discuss that protégés (i.e. a mentor-mentee) need to bring the following skills and attitudes to the mentoring relationship: (1) a basic understanding of the teaching process and the nature of leadership in general and in effective organizations; (2) good listening and communication skills; (3) openness and collegiality; and (4) a commitment to mentoring. As previously mentioned, if mentoring process conducted appropriately i.e. characteristic, environmental, and organizational wise mentoring two parties i.e. mentor and mentee could get its benefits and learning process enhances. Therefore, to see the real practice of relevant teaching theories and their connection to lecture pedagogy. Larson and Marsh (2005) argued that theory is practice and practice is theorized, as practice is transformed over time. This means, when you continuously enhance the reality of learning practices overtime that could leads to build new theories of pedagogy. Consequently, the current research seeks answers to

mentoring activities in diversified cultures to enhance accumulated pedagogy practices in Arabic context.

3. Research Aims

The current research aims at finding answers for two questions:

- 1- How staff member exercises mentoring function in a diversified HEIs cultures in Bahraini context.
- 2- Identify the mentoring activities in academia life in which a mentor-mentee (protégé) interaction is created.

3. Research Methodological stages.

The qualitative approach was deployed to help achieve the current research aims. The experience of 55 staff members in a Bahraini university {i.e. AMA University and now called University of Technology Bahrain (UTB)} were utilized to achieve research aims. One-to-one structured interview was utilized as a data collection tool. The data collected via that structured interviews aim at getting a clear understanding of academic mentoring activities in a Bahraini HEI context. The research lasted for three consecutive years (from 2015-2016 academic year to 2017-2018 academic year) in which most of staff members practiced and participated in three accelerations at least.

4. Analysis and Discussions

Data collected were analyzed to get answers for research two questions. For the first research question i.e. mentoring

in a diversified culture, interviewees agreed on mentoring in organizations i.e. universities with diversified cultures is not an easy task at all, but a challenging one, as you have to consider cultures consequences and ramifications in this perspective. Data analysis revealed that the staff members' roots are highly diversified as they came from different corners in the globe. The main portion came with Far East culture, mainly Philippines. Another part came with Arabic culture backgrounds i.e. Egyptian, Jordanians, Iraqis, Algerians, Bahrainis, etc. A third part came with western culture like British, Australian, and American. A fourth part came with Asian cultures like Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis. The last portion came with African cultures like Nigeria, South Africa, Senegal, and Sudan. Interviewees confirmed the importance of what so called "*ice breaking stage*" before starting the mentoring activities. In that ice breaking stage staff members get familiar and the accepted and non-accepted verbal and nonverbal communication ways and tools in each culture. Non-verbal communication is the conducted communication without words by body language. It stress on "*how*" not on "*what*". More specifically, how you speak not what words you are using. It includes eye contact, hand movements, facial expressions, touch, gestures, etc. from the discussion with interviewees, I did understand that each

one was keen to know about his colleague's culture to conduct a safe and sound mentoring process. However, the magnitude of that collected knowledge is not that much because of the limited time in each visit, most interviewees stressed it's sufficiency for conducting a sound mentoring process.

For the second research question i.e. mentoring activities, data analysis revealed that mentoring activities centered on two areas:

- (1) *Pre accreditation activities* that aims at preparing staff members and taught materials coupled with their related TLA (teaching, learning, and assessing policy). In addition, writing up SER i.e. self-evaluation report to get the intended accreditation e.g. ECBE (European Council for Business Education) and institutional accreditation.
- (2) *Post accreditation activities* that aims at maintaining the same level of quality in practice.

Before the accreditation, staff members exercise many mentoring roles centered on preparing all needed details for connecting with what should be to get the accreditation. Here, legitimate question was raised "*what kind of*

teaching practice AMA intended to transform?" of course, the answer was the practice that leads to the accreditation with full confidence. From that hypothetical statement, staff members have taken their orientations. To achieve the alignment with accreditation criteria, the following activities were undertaken:

- (1) *Benchmarking process* was undertaken with accredited universities (locally, regionally, and internationally).
- (2) *Gap analysis* was undertaken to figure out the required efforts and their magnitudes.
- (3) *Training sessions* were suggested for staff members to help align with the restructuring process.
- (4) *Program reengineering process* started on daily base to manage the change.

In *benchmarking process*, all courses and their course specifications were compared with those delivered by local, regional, and international leaders. Via revision meetings, and rounds of workshops, headed by each program's coordinator, all courses were checked and later refined. In this mission, program's coordinator was working as a change catalyst in his/her surroundings. In these workshops, coordinators were keen to work with colleagues as a cooperative team's leader with specific target for each team member. Also,

exercising collectivist orientation. That approach help ignite team spirit amongst team's members. Part of the team was responsible for searching for updated course contents and teaching materials to be added. Their responsibilities were drawing a table summarizing the comparison process with much focus on what lacks us against what they have. Another part explored the TLA policies for these courses compared with those currently applied in the university. Their mission ended up with another table summing-up what we lack in this perspective. One of the revealed interesting learning and mentoring method was "*library activity*" in which students are escorted to library by course instructor(s) to get academic orientation for the available online databases, students U-drive (i.e. Moodle system), and library facilities.

On the light of this benchmarking process, the *gap analysis* revealed courses to be changed completely, courses with minor changes, and courses to be added. Same logic applied on assessing the appropriate TLA policies and tools. These two stages ended by refining, updating, and aligning with leaders in this perspective. In the same time, the suggested delivery system ought to be designed in a way that respect both local and regional cultures (i.e. Bahrain and GCC) in courses contents and delivery tools. Inevitably,

this process enhanced the quality of learning environment.

In *training session roles*, senior staff members headed by program coordinators are sharing the outcomes of benchmarking process with junior staff members. In one-to-one induction and orientation sessions, all staff members were familiar about: (1) the new courses i.e. courses that have been added to the existed ones and why. (2) The novel course' specifications i.e. the updated contents for each course. (3) The appropriate teaching methods and their related learning and assessing tools i.e. the new TLA policy. (4) The new learning technologies and software(s) and their manuals i.e. subscribed databases like EBSCO, Moodle procedures, and classrooms ICT facilities. (5) The new follow-up auditing procedures conducted by quality assurance center (QA) have declared and carefully clarified to maintain the consistency in delivery. (6) The importance of using the staff member published works (i.e. published in refereed journals and published books) in teaching materials to keep students up-rest about new trends and updated literatures were stressed. (7) Setting the new pre-post exam moderation policy both internally (i.e. done by specialized colleagues) and externally (i.e. done by other university staff members) to enhance exam quality

and graduates competencies via assuring all gained skills are measured.

Finally, in *Program Reengineering process* all approved changes found their way into practice. In that period, program coordinators exercise another mentoring activity in convincing each staff member about the importance of these changes for his/her professional and entrepreneurial career at large. The restructuring process included: (1) determining maximum supervision's quota based on staff member seniority coupled with a student's term-based "progress report". More specifically, five, four, and three MBA students was the allowed supervision quota for professor, associate, and assistant professors respectively. The logic behind that was professor is the most capable in guidance and supervision and assistant professor is the least in this perspective beside compliance with Bahraini HEC (Higher Education Council) regulations in this perspective. Consequently, this led to develop effective learning environment with enough time in guidance and support. Progress report help assist in giving imminent and timely feedback for MBA students regarding their progress and achievements. (2) External examiners' list in each domain's specialists was added to the applied moderation policy for enhancing exams-questions' quality, and in long run enhancing the graduate's competencies. (3) New VIVA protocol

and academic etiquette were added to enhance the quality of MBA public discussion. (4) Portfolios internal auditing committee has been put into practice as a first tier in quality improving before checked from quality center as a second tier in this process. (5) Advisory board to get feedback from market and other stakeholders has been a common practice in all delivered programs. (6) Guest speakers coupled with field/site visits for fresh academic practices and professional updates have been common practices especially in MBA program. (7) after approved as a common practice, samples of staff members' publications and all other academic productions ought to be inserted in the teaching materials (and appeared in course portfolio) to offer fresh and updated teaching materials.

After the Accreditation with full confidence, program coordinator's mission is not only to maintain the same level of quality but also to work consistently on its improvement via continues workshops and inductions of junior staff members. Therefore, mentoring activities extended to all day-to-day academic activities.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The current research clarified the appropriate way in practicing mentoring activities in a higher education institution in Bahraini context. The mentoring activities are centered on two

main areas: gap analysis, training sessions, and program reengineering activities. Therefore, these three groups of mentoring activities ought to be considered and exercised appropriately. In addition to that, the study revealed the importance of considering cultural differences in achieving HIEs objectives and targeted accreditations. Therefore, the gained experience from this case help enhance the quality of teaching, mentoring, and researching practices, as the richness of that diversified culture positively fueled each staff member expertise, skills, and communication patterns. Therefore, I am urging all HEIs to extend their hiring strategy to include diversified staff members to enjoy the beauty of each culture.

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