Lecturers' perceptions about mentoring and challenges they face when mentoring students at an institution of higher learning in Namibia

Kenneth Nzwala

University of Namibia, Katima Mulilo Campus

knzwala@unam.na

Abstract

This paper examined lecturers' perceptions about mentoring, as well as the challenges they faced in their endeavours to mentor students at the University of Namibia (UNAM), Katima Mulilo Campus. It used a mixed methods approach, and took the form of a survey. The study was descriptive in nature. Data collection was done by using a questionnaire. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to 12 lecturers who participated in the study at the UNAM, Katima Mulilo Campus. Data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics, with thematic analysis of qualitative data. The findings were that the frequency of mentoring meetings was too limited; that is, there wasn't enough mentoring time accorded to the mentorship programme; mentees saw no need to be mentored, and thus did not turn up for mentorship meetings. In addition, some lecturers or mentors were overwhelmed with more mentees than others. The study recommended that mentorship meetings should be done regularly; mentors should educate and encourage their mentees to turn up for mentorship meetings as per the mentorship schedules; and there should be equitable distribution of mentees among mentors for the sustenance of the programme.

Keywords: *mentoring, lecturers, students, mentor, challenges, qualitative, mentee, perceptions, quantitative, descriptive design, positivist*

Introduction and literature review

The purpose of this paper was to solicit the University of Namibia (UNAM), Katima Mulilo Campus lecturers' perceptions about mentorship; the challenges they faced when mentoring their students; and the measures they took to mitigate these challenges. It is important to state that mentorship stands out as an old concept in academia, and because of its significance and worth, the practice continues to be maintained in academic circles across the world (Okurame, 2008). It is a "one- to- one relationship between an older person and a younger one to pass on knowledge, experience and judgment or to provide guidance and friendship" (Powell, 1999, p. 3). Similarly, UNAM's mentorship policy (2012, p. 3) defines mentoring as "a personal development relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person". This translates into the understanding that the process of mentorship is sustained by experts or the more knowledgeable others (MKOs) (Vygotsky, 1978). The UNAM policy indicates mentorship as having two important legs, a mentor and a mentee. The mentorship policy of the UNAM (2012) spells out the roles

of the two legs of the mentoring process as follows: a mentee is a person who is being mentored, a person who is being advised, coached, and taught, and a mentor is a guide and teacher. George and Mampilly (2012, p. 2) perceive a mentor as a "highly resourceful person who is organized, rich in skills and experience, knowledge, attitude, and willingness to impart his qualities to the younger generation".

While the main aim of mentorship is to transform students and teachers into responsible and accountable colleagues, it is also incumbent upon mentees to support the initiative for the benefit of the mentor and mentee (Besar, 2018). It should be mentioned that mentors are important in the sense that they offer advice and guidance not only on academic matters but also on labour related matters. Nonetheless, this phenomenon is not only particular to education, but applies to various organizations and/or agencies. An apprentice in any workplace will have to have someone (a mentor) to guide them until they internalize the expectations of the job and are now able to do the job successfully on their own. In other words, this practice helps to

expose mentees to the real world of work (Bukaliya, 2012), and this is exactly what this paper attempted to associate mentorship with. To give a practical example, it is virtually impossible in the academic world to study towards a doctoral degree or any postgraduate qualification (for that matter) without a mentor, and that is why normally in an academic society, mentors are attached to such candidates so as to facilitate learning. Therefore, mentorship is an "intervention that aims at decreasing risk factors and increasing the likelihood of success" (Stumbo, Blegen, & Lindal-Lewis, 2008, p. 45) for students. According to George and Mampilly (2012), mentoring changes and transforms mentees into professionals. George and Mampilly (2012, p. 1) furthermore contend that mentoring "supports professional growth and renewal, which in turn empowers faculty as individuals and colleagues". Furthermore, mentoring informs professional as well as personal development of a mentee. Research also indicates that "mentoring increases job satisfaction, career attainment and organizational commitment" (Pinho, Coetzee, & Schreuder, 2005, p. 20). According to Pincho, Coetzee, and Schreuder (2005, p. 20), "mentoring involves vocational or career development, psychosocial support, and role modelling".

While mentoring is seen to have a lot of benefits for mentees, it is also worth to state that mentors are faced with a range of challenges in their quest to help their mentees. One of such challenges is the availability of *time*. Research indicates that because mentoring is a heavy responsibility, more time needs to be accorded to it so that the exercise can be effective and achieve its goals (Kilburg, 2007). Kilburg (2007, p. 294) further acknowledges that "if mentoring is seen as an important practice in an academic setup, then adequate time must be provided for observations and meetings". Similarly, Cunningham (2012) cites time as an important variable which should be worth mentioning in this regard. He says that it is difficult for mentors to find enough time to engage in the activity. This researcher also acknowledges the fact that if mentoring time is not availed and clearly defined, students' concerns will not be fully addressed. Another challenge, which I believe takes time to address relates to student numbers versus available mentors. This is a

challenge, and is likely to reduce the quality of intervention the mentor renders (Martinez, 2004). Furthermore, Martinez (2004) acknowledges that if one mentor is allocated many mentees, quality in terms of assistance rendered will be compromised.

Mentor attributes

To do something in a more professional manner, one has to conform to set standards or norms. In the same way, mentors should have attributes that inform effective mentoring of their subjects. George and Mampilly (2012, p.137) contend that "a mentor must embody values, aspirations, wisdom and strength that the student respects and perhaps wishes to attain". George and Mampilly (2012) further say that a mentor should be a person of great rank, experience and/or expertise who has the ability to teach and inspire another person so as to develop him or her not only personally but also professionally. A mentor should show willingness and commitment to the mentorship process to realise its goals. Research claims that "both the mentor and the mentee should strive to achieve open communication and rely upon each other to indicate their needs and preferences" (Barrett, Mazerolle, & Nottingham, 2017, p. 157).

Models of mentorship

There are different models of mentorship, and in this study I focus on the following:

One on one mentoring: This is an individualized and very personal mentoring model. The mentor sees and holds discussions with one mentee at a time. The model is strong at developing a strong relationship between the parties involved in the exercise (Caroll, n.d.). According to Tolan (2013, p.1), "most people prefer this model because it allows both the mentor and protégé or understudy to develop a personal relationship, and communicate regularly while the mentor provides individual guidance and support".

Team mentoring: Here the mentee and mentors meet jointly as a team. This is of great benefit to the mentee because s/he will have different points of view on areas of interest under discussion, and will thus have other colleagues with whom to share views and /or collaborate (Tolan, 2013).

Multiple mentors: This model suggests mentees to have more than one mentor and

these mentors meet the mentee individually (Carol, n.d.).

Peer mentoring: This is a situation where senior students, and generally all the workers, are used to mentor junior students and junior workers. This model is more informal as compared to other models of mentoring like one on one mentoring, team mentoring, multiple mentoring, and distance mentoring. According to Caroll (n.d., p. 1), "peers can provide important advice and guidance about negotiating in the academic world and about mentoring relationships".

Distance mentoring: This is when mentoring is done via email and by telephone, as well as through occasional visits. This is important if mentors are at different institutions and it is difficult to meet one- on-one or face to face for intended discussions. It so happens if a certain area of expertise is needed and there is no one in the institution that can do it. Cunningham (2012, p. 60) suggests that "there appears to be a fundamental connection between the stage of professional development a trainee is at and the nature of the mentoring which will be most appropriate".

Statement of the problem

Learning takes place effectively and efficiently if lecturers don't only understand how their students learn, but also have familiarity with challenges that impinge their learning. As much as individual attention applies to school learners, there is also a need for this attention to be extended to students in institutions of higher learning by way of mentorship. Though the mentorship policy is in place at the UNAM, Katima Mulilo Campus, lecturers do not consider or perceive it as a mandatory exercise; they relax to mentor students, as if it were not a normal academic practice. There are no frequent mentoring activities or meetings taking place in departments, and this prompts undesirable students' behaviour, as well as students' poor academic performance. This is due to the fact that students seem to be left on their own, which is a cause for great worry and concern.

Research questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are lecturers' perceptions about mentoring at Katima Mulilo Campus of the University of Namibia?
2. What challenges do the lecturers encounter when mentoring students?
3. How do the lecturers overcome the identified challenges?

The purpose of the study

This paper sought to first investigate lecturers' perceptions about mentoring. Second to establish different challenges lecturers face when mentoring students at the University of Namibia, Katima Mulilo Campus. Third, to establish strategies lecturers used to mitigate the challenges faced, as a way to strengthen their mentorship meetings with students. This is significant because students who are effectively mentored always lead a successful academic career. The study benefits both the mentors and the mentees as it exposes them to the mentorship protocol.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory of the apprenticeship model. The theory claims that learning is best realized through interaction in a *community of practice* (Mentor teacher, 2013). In this paper a 'community of practice' refers to a group of "people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor" (Mentor teacher, 2013).

The theory further argues that during interaction between mentor and mentee, the mentee's level of growth is elevated to the next level of academic knowledge or excellence. Lave and Wenger (cited in King, 2017, p. 101) refer to such collaborations as social nature of learning, and maintain that it is this type of learning that benefits "newcomers from old timers" in the workplace. This also has a positive bearing on the mentee's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) due to the fact that through the apprenticeship model, the mentee "assumes the role of an expert" (David, 2007, p. 3), the result of directly benefiting from the mentor. Supporters of the apprenticeship model like Sfard and Mills contend that the model gives rise to teamwork, solidarity and collaboration with well mentored students assisting the weaker ones (David, 2007). This implies that "learning through participation as apprenticeship might also encourage the

students' collaboration in the classroom" (Besar, 2018, p. 52)

Methodology
Research design
The study was both qualitative and quantitative in nature and was informed by a positivist epistemology. Springer (2010, p. 19) admits that quantitative research tends "to reflect positivism, the assumption that reality consists of facts and causal processes that are independent of observers and thus can be revealed through scientific observation". According to Springer (2010, p. 249), "the purpose of a descriptive design is to describe phenomenon in quantitative terms". The answers to the questionnaire gave a picture of the perceptions lecturers had on mentoring, challenges they faced when mentoring their students, as well as how they mitigated such challenges.

Sampling
The sample of twelve (12) lecturers was drawn from lecturers of the UNAM, Katima Mulilo Campus only. This was done in order to get a representative sample, as well as making generalizations easier. I used purposive sampling to draw the sample. "Purposive sampling is a procedure in which the researcher samples whoever he or she believes

to be representative of a given population" (Springer, 2010, p. 107).

Data collection
Data were collected by using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to 12 lecturers who participated in the study to express their perceptions on mentoring. Lecturers were asked to give their opinions about mentoring, the challenges or problems they faced with mentoring, as well as how they addressed these challenges. Some items required respondents to substantiate their views so as to get the full depth of their perceptions regarding the practice.

Data Analysis
Data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics, with thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Findings
This section of the paper presents data on the UNAM, Katima Mulilo Campus' lecturers' perceptions on mentoring. Data is presented in accordance with how lecturers responded to the questionnaire, and was done question by question (See Figure 1). Each item reflects the extent to which it was either supported or not supported by respondents in percentage form as in Figure 1.
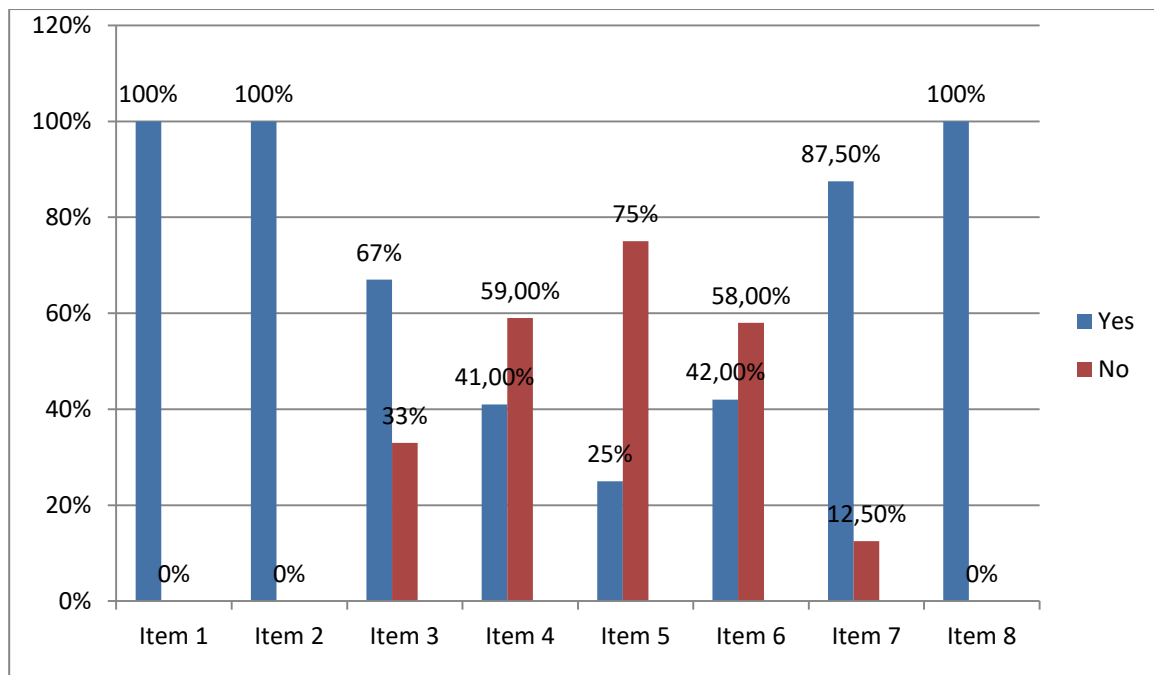

Figure 1: Lecturers' perceptions on student mentoring

Figure 1 clearly indicates how lecturers responded to questions in the questionnaire. It indicates the extent to which respondents expressed their perceptions to the contents of the questionnaire by either indicating 'Yes' or 'No'. Prior to analysing the findings of this research, the researcher formulated a statistical null hypothesis (H_0) as shown below:

- H_0 = Lecturers show no interest in the mentorship programme.
- H_1 = Lecturers show interest in the mentorship programme.

Findings from the questionnaire (Figure 1) revealed that all the 12 respondents indicated their preference for mentoring and that it was really helpful to mentor students in institutions of higher learning. Since the response was positive and overwhelming with all 12 respondents who supported mentoring, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0) that lecturers showed no interest in the mentorship programme, and conclude that lecturers showed interest in the mentoring programme (H_1). This seems to confirm that mentoring is seen as a significant tool if students are to perform to their maximum at the UNAM, Katima Mulilo Campus. Lecturers' approval of mentorship (as good practice) seemed to have influenced their responses to other questions in the questionnaire. As a way to further demonstrate their approval of mentorship, 8 of the 12 lecturers indicated that the programme came at the right time. However, the lecturers indicated the frequency of meetings as being insufficient and that this needed consideration as a matter of priority. For example, "We don't conduct meetings regularly with students" (Lecturer 3); "Our mentorship meetings are rare, sometimes only once in a week" (Lecturer 8). Lecturers further suggested that meetings be made more regular in order to establish a good relationship with mentees. About 5 of the 12 respondents supported the current frequency of meetings as stipulated in the mentorship policy of the UNAM as being good practice. For example: twice per year for each mentorship group, and once per semester for individual mentees.

Lecturers expressed concern about the availability of mentees for meetings. While 3 of the 12 lecturers indicated that mentees were readily available for meetings, 9 of the 12 lecturers indicated that mentees were not turning up for such meetings. One respondent expressed this by saying, "*they never come*" for meetings. Another one said, "*They are reluctant to come to meetings and they apparently view such meetings with suspicion*". Mentees not showing up for meetings could be attributed to heavy academic workload as one lecturer pointed out: "*Mentees often complained of being occupied with many tasks at a time which affected their availability for meetings*".

About 5 of the 12 lecturers expressed satisfaction that mentees were willing to share their experiences and problems during mentorship meetings. Conversely, 7 of the 12 lecturers saw it differently, and expressed their opinions as follows:

Lecturer 1: *"They are reserved about their experiences and they do not come out in the open about themselves".*
Lecturer 2: *"They have not yet opened up probably because they have not yet established trust in the mentor because of just meeting them once in a semester".*
Lecturer 7: *"They are too shy to speak out their experiences".*
Lecturer 8: *"They don't seem used to mentorship".*
Lecturer 10: *"They don't get to the bottom of their concerns and need training on the concept of mentorship".*
Lecturer 11: *"The concept is new to students".*
Lecturer 12: *"They don't know what it is to be mentored and the benefits thereof".*

While 2 of the 12 lecturers expressed discontent and/or unhappiness about time set for mentoring sessions, 10 of them expressed satisfaction and indicated that the time was enough. All 12 lecturers shared their support for the mentorship policy saying the areas of focus were very clear. Regarding the challenges they faced, the respondents, as shown in Table 1 below, expressed their views as follows:

Table 1: Mentorship challenges faced by lecturers

Respondent	Responses

Lecturer 1	Not all mentees valued these sessions and it takes a lot of persuasion to bring them to these meetings which ends up being a mere formality
Lecturer 2	The programme has not kicked off yet at our campus
Lecturer 3	The programme adds on to the lecturing workload
Lecturer 4	The programme has not kicked off yet at our campus
Lecturer 5	Other students do not see the importance of attending the mentorship sessions
Lecturer 6	Students do not show up for meetings due to lectures and assignments
Lecturer 7	The programme adds on to the lecturing workload
Lecturer 8	Students do not show up for meetings due to lectures and assignments
Lecturer 9	There should be one time slot for mentorship meetings that accommodates both mentors and mentees during working hours
Lecturer 10	The programme adds on to the lecturing workload
Lecturer 11	Students do not show up for mentorship meetings due to lectures and assignments
Lecturer 12	Students do not show up for mentorship meetings due to lectures and assignments

Lecturers also expressed what they did to overcome the challenges they faced and their responses are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: How lecturers overcame mentorship challenges

Respondent	Responses
Lecturer 1	I encouraged students to attend meetings
Lecturer 2	I shared with students the benefits of mentorship
Lecturer 3	I conduct mentorship meetings after hours so that classes are not disturbed
Lecturer 4	I always tell them they cannot be forced to attend the meetings stressing the importance of the mentorship meetings to them
Lecturer 5	I advised students to come for meetings
Lecturer 6	I normally talk to students about how valuable mentorship meetings are.
Lecturer 7	I ask students to identify timeslots they are free in order to hold mentorship meetings.
Lecturer 8	I always encourage students to value the meetings
Lecturer 9	I always talk to students about mentorship meetings.
Lecturer 10	I work meeting schedules with them
Lecturer 11	I advise them why such meetings are good.
Lecturer 12	I conducted a special lecture on mentorship to my students and this made them understand the value of mentorship.

Discussions

This investigation gave rise to themes such as extension of frequency of mentoring meetings; time for mentoring sessions; mentees saw no need for mentorship meetings as well as student numbers (mentees) versus available mentors.

Extending the frequency of meetings with mentees: Frequency of meetings refers to how regular the mentor engages the mentees. This paper revealed that the area of '*frequency of meetings*' needed consideration. It revealed that the frequency of mentoring meetings was not adequate and should be revisited despite the UNAM's mentorship policy stating that "mentorship shall take place on a regular basis" (UNAM Draft Mentorship Policy, n. d., p.6).

Time: The study established that time for meetings with mentees was not enough. The study suggests that mentoring should have a time slot on the timetable so as to accord it enough time like any other academic module. According to Kilburg (2007), mentoring is a heavy responsibility and thus deserves to be accorded enough time. It is furthermore believed that "if mentoring is seen as an important practice in an academic setup, then adequate time must be provided for observations and meetings" (Kilburg, 2007, p. 294). Cunningham (2012) also cites time as

[being] an important variable and that mentors are not able to effectively carry out their mentoring function due to lack of time.

Mentees see no need to be mentored, and thus do not show up for mentorship meetings: From what this paper has gathered, it comes out clearly that mentees do not attach any significance to mentoring. This is so because they do not show up for mentoring meetings. Research states that the aim of mentoring is to transform students into responsible and accountable colleagues (David, 2007). According to Bukaliya (2012), mentoring helps to expose mentees to the real world of work. In the same vein, "mentoring involves vocational or career development, psychosocial support, and role modelling" (Pinho, Coetzee, & Schreuder, 2005, p. 20). It is during mentoring meetings that relationships are established, and students (mentees) are guided by their mentors (Powell, 1999; King, 2017).

Student numbers versus available mentors: This is perceived as a problem, and if students (mentees) outnumber mentors, the practice becomes ineffective and difficult to manage. According to Martinez (2004), this situation is likely to reduce the quality of intervention the mentor renders. Furthermore, if a mentor has many mentees, quality in terms of assistance rendered can be compromised (Martinez, 2004).

Recommendations
Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:
- The section in the mentorship policy of the UNAM on the frequency of meetings should be revisited and made very clear;
- Regular monitoring activities across the UNAM Campuses should be strengthened to regulate meetings between mentors and mentees;
- Institutions of higher learning should encourage student mentorship;
- Mentees should be equitably distributed among mentors to avoid certain mentors overcrowded with mentees and to maintain efficiency and effectiveness during mentorship meetings;
- Mentoring sessions should have a time slot on the time table so as to maintain the desired frequency of meetings with mentees.

Conclusion
Mentoring is the way to go in any workplace, especially in institutions of higher learning. Mentorship strengthens institutional capacity; elevates work ethics and if an institution of higher learning, the UNAM for example, is to operate effectively, mentorship should be the norm. Students should understand the benefits that come with it (mentoring) and that without it they are likely not to do well in their studies. Furthermore, mentorship is an important tool used to rededicate students to their studies, ultimately attaining their goals and objectives.

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