Enhancing Professional Growth: Effective Mentorship Strategies in an Open Distance e-Learning Institution

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Abstract. Effective mentorship in Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) ensures that mentees are equipped with the necessary academic skills to flourish in an academic setting. Vast research has been conducted on mentoring, however, not much literature was found on mentorship strategies in an ODeL context, specifically in the South African setting. This study conducted in a South African ODeL institution explores effective strategies that can be employed by mentors to intensify and strengthen mentees' professional growth. The study is guided by a qualitative research method using a phenomenological research design with semi-structured interviews to collect data. The population for the study consists of senior and junior academics and purposive sampling was used to sample 15 mentors and 15 mentees in an ODeL institution as the research site; the thematic approach was adopted to analyze the data. Ethical considerations such as - informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation – were adhered to. Furthermore, it adopted the positive psychology approach to gain insights into the working relations between mentors and mentees. Participants identified the key qualities of successful mentees, the challenges they face, the support required for a successful mentorship, and recommendations based on factors that have contributed to their academic and professional growth. This led to the conclusion that effective mentorship in ODeL settings, with the help of experienced colleagues, plays a key role in strengthening novice employees' growth. This paper contributes by addressing a literature gap, offering specific practical insights and an enhanced understanding of effective mentorship strategies in ODeL settings.

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1. Introduction

Institutions of higher learning across the globe, implement mentorship programmes to build staff capacity, particularly among early-career scholars and mentees (Schriever & Grainger, 2019). Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF) recognizes the essential nature of mentorship in higher education, hence, their programmes are initiated to assist early-career academics in higher education (Dhunpath, Matisonn & Samuel, 2018). Goosen and van Heerden (2019) define, Open Distance e-Learning, as a form of an education system that uses technology to provide students with the opportunity to learn wherever they are and in their own time. There is urgency for a mentorship programme, in the higher education sector, particularly in the form of Open Distance e-Learning, to increase mentee confidence (Hill, Ward, Seay & Buzenski, 2022). Mentorship strategies and their effectiveness are well understood, however, this study investigated perspectives of employees in the unique context of an ODeL which, it is anticipated, would differ from the traditional settings of contact institutions.

Mentoring in the ODeL context as compared to the traditional model, in institutions of higher learning, can be very challenging for academics. Mentors in the higher education sector are considered prolific scholars with emotional intelligence, who tend to be more satisfied with their careers, and have a good developmental relationship that promotes socialization, learning, career advancement, psychological adjustment, and preparation for leadership for mentees (Johnson, 2015). For the present study, the inclusive criteria, for a mentor are that, the person - is a senior academic, well-known in his/her field; has produced five research outputs in the past five years in reputable journals and supervised five Master's students to completion. Johnson (2015) defines a mentee as a novice in a field, who is dedicated and ready to learn from a well-experienced colleague. A mentee, for this study, is an emerging scholar with a doctoral degree who has not supervised more than five master's students to completion, or an emerging scholar with a Master's degree.

Nabi, Walmsley, Sir and Osman (2023: 1) define mentoring "as a one-to-one relationship between an experienced colleague (a mentor) and a less experienced colleague (a mentee) that provides a variety of career development and personal growth functions." Senior academics foster a smooth generational change, passing knowledge and skills to the newer academics, through mentorship programmes. According to Joe, Cusano, Leckie, Czuczman, Exner, Yong, Ruzycki and Lithgow (2023), structured mentorship programmes have proved to be a success. When the process commences, mentoring takes the form of the seasoned academic guiding the novice, then it develops into a relationship of exchanging ideas and knowledge. Most higher education institutions have mentoring programmes to ensure that mentees get

all the guidance and support they need to smoothly adapt into new situations in institutions. Mentoring programmes come in different forms: peer mentoring, group mentoring, e-mentoring, collaborative mentoring, multiple-level mentoring and reverse mentoring (Griffiths, Kopanidis & Steel, 2018; Griffith & Mullen, 2016; Pololi & Evans, 2015). However, regardless of the form, all mentoring programmes contribute to helping mentees in their professional development and career aspirations (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). A study conducted in South-South Nigeria, comprising of 723 novice researchers in 19 universities found that mentorship practices significantly contributed to the research productivity of early career academics (Okon, Owan & Owan, 2022). Mentors have walked the path, they know what lies ahead, therefore, it is essential that they share their experiences with early-career academics for their personal and institutional success (Joe, Cusano, Leckie, Czuczman, Exner, Yong, Ruzycki & Lithgow, 2023)). The relationship between mentors and mentees, therefore, must be healthy. Merga and Mason (2021) suggest that one effective way of enhancing the mentor-mentee relationship in higher education, is to ensure that mentors co-author with their mentees in research outputs. The American Association for Higher Education states that good practices in universities will encourage mentors to initiate appropriate mentorship activities for their mentees, although, there are always dynamics, such as - age, gender and ethnicity – which contribute to tension in mentor-mentee relationships (Bailey, Voiles, Finkelstein & Matarazzo, 2016). Homophily, defined by Laakasuo, Rotkirch, Van Duijn, Berg, Jokela, David-Barrett, Miettinen, Pearce and Dunbar (2020) as similar affinities and attributes in people who interact, may not always be possible, hence, the parties need to find ways of using their differences to create a satisfactory working atmosphere.

Mentorship requires certain strategies and approaches. There are different approaches that institutions, mentors and mentees may take to develop effective mentorship practices. Mentoring can take different forms: one-to-one, in groups or teams, peer mentoring, e-mentoring, reverse or informal mentoring (Dhunpath, Matisonn & Samuel, 2020). Savage, Karp & Logue (2004) recommend various strategies around the mentorship programmes, for instance, informal settings such as lunch time for interactions between a mentor and a mentee, different activities in recognition of the mentor for the mentorship, creating opportunities for collaboration and interactions. Even with such varied suggestions and recommendations, mentorship in higher education is still not where it should be. A major challenge with teaching in higher education is that of "publish or perish", therefore, senior academics may be too focused on publishing scholarly writing and not on nurturing early-career academics. For this reason, early-career academics may find it hard to get mentors, and for some who do, the mentoring might not be effective. Most higher education institutions have formal mentoring programmes in place so that early-career academics can get the support they require to succeed, however, the relevant question is whether these programmes are effective, hence, serve their purpose.

Lecturing, supervising, researching, writing scholarly articles, and starting community development projects are among the many tasks early-career academics have to handle upon beginning their duties as lecturers, in higher education institutions (Mantai & Marrone, 2023). These tasks may be, too divers, daunting and challenging for early-career lecturers who have just joined institutions and are still finding their feet in academia. Getting assistance and guidance in terms of mentorship for the early-career academics until they gain confidence, therefore, is critical and fundamental if higher education institutions are to attract, empower and keep emerging academics.

A study by Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka (2015) reveals that academics in Open Distance e-Learning tend to just upload PDF versions meant for traditional learning contexts onto online portals with minimal adjustments. Authors of the present study argue that this tendency in ODeL can be mitigated only if senior academics, who have experience in the online portal can equip inexperienced mentors with the necessary skills to handle such challenges. A study conducted in Sri Lanka indicates that re-skilling of academics and mentors in online instruction is a matter of urgency; such mentors can empower mentees to activate their goals through self-discipline inculcated from online instruction and develop a new set of academic skills (Gamage, Perera & Wijewardena, 2021). According to Wild, Canale, and Herdklotz (2017) mentors in open distance learning can also help mentees speedily understand the organizational culture and system on higher education institutions.

In this digital era, mentorship has a significant effect on teaching and learning in higher education, thus, to enhance effective mentorship, mentors should foster transformative learning during the mentoring process (Tanış & Barker, 2017). A study conducted in South Africa revealed that mentors do reflect on their practices for the professional career growth of the mentees to ensure they assist them to be competitive in the academic world and gain insights into their surroundings (Gordon, 2019; Hakro & Mathew, 2020). According to Ibukunolu (2017), an appropriate and relevant relationship between mentor and mentee in the higher education sector has a positive impact on mentee's research productivity, thereby, the latter's opportunities of growing increases, for instance, attending a local or international conference. In addition, the mentee begins to produce research outputs in reputable international journals. Literature from various contexts identifies some of the best mentorship model in higher education. A study conducted by Brannagan and Oriol (2014), for example, recommends that effective mentorship in higher education, should ensure that the mentor and the mentee are paired based on factors like, their educational background, course assignments, research interests and responsibilities. This implies, for instance, before a mentee uses online methods to deliver the lesson, the mentor should introduce the former to all the systems and materials that are applicable to online teaching.

Studies have demonstrated the positive impact that mentorship programmes have in the higher education sector, despite that, for example, a study conducted by Goerisch,

Basiliere, Rosener, McKee, Hunt, and Parker (2019) shows that mentorship programmes in the higher education sector are still rooted in patriarchal systems of power that promote individualism and exceptionalism. In addition to that, some institutions' mentorship programmes overlook experts who have been historically underrepresented – in favour of the seniors who have never experienced historically-tenured exclusion. Some mentors and mentees in higher education often have different perspectives on how the role of a mentor should be enacted and this contributes to the ineffectiveness of mentorship programmes in higher education (Rinfret, Young & McDonald, 2023). Mgaiwa and Kapinga (2021) show that in Tanzania the mentorship programmes in higher education are not specific to young emerging scholars but for all academics and they are not monitored by the university management. To overcome this, university management must ensure that there is a proper mechanism in place to supervise mentees.

The majority of early-emerging scholars who are entering Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) might meet the academic requirements for teaching in ODeL, however, these early academics were trained in traditional face-to-face teaching and learning and were trained to be traditional face-to-face instructors, therefore, it might be difficult for them to adapt to the ODeL context set in the digital age. A study done in Uganda revealed that mentorship is not yet institutionalized, subsequently, there is limited time that is allocated for it and any such programme is implemented in an ad hoc manner (Nakanjako, Byakika-Kibwika, Kintu, Aizire, Nakwagala, Luzige, Namisi, Mayanja-Kizza & Kamya (2011). In the present study, therefore, we asked pertinent questions concerning strategies, deemed effective, which are employed by mentors in Open Distance e-Learning, to intensify and strengthen mentees' professional growth.

The insufficient research on effective strategies adopted by mentors in Open Distance e-Learning to strengthen mentees' professional growth in ODeL, in developing countries like South Africa, may have serious implications for the success of any interventions geared towards developing early-emerging scholars and transformative agendas in the ODeL context. The present study contributes to the body of new knowledge by proposing a mentor-mentee policy in the ODeL context that ensures that the Chairs of Departments pair mentors and mentees based on well-established criteria - their educational backgrounds and areas of specialization; it should be included in the Key Performance Indicator of the mentors to publish a paper in a high-impact journal with their mentees, at least once a year. In addition, the mentors should regularly have meetings with the mentee for which evidence should be submitted to the Chairs of Departments on a quarterly basis and the mentors should introduce their mentees to their local and international networking. Adhering to these requirements would add value to the programme as well as the mentee's professional growth.

Aim of the study

• The study aims to explore effective strategies employed, by mentors in an Open Distance e-Learning institution, to intensify and strengthen mentees' professional growth.

Research questions

• What are the primary factors contributing to effective mentorship in an ODeL context?

• What challenges are encountered in the mentorship journey in an ODeL institution?

• How can mentors choose mentees in an ODeL institution?

• What effective strategies can be used to improve the effectiveness of mentorship programmes in Open Distance e-Learning?

2. Theoretical framework

This study adopted the positive psychology approach to gain insights into the working relations between mentors and mentees. Positive psychology was an initiative of Martin Seligman in 1998 and is the scientific study of strengths, well-being, and optimal functioning. It is a scientific study of positive experiences, individual traits, and the factors that facilitate their development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The authors argue that the nature of a working relationship, for example, between a mentor and the mentee, is fundamental to the individuals' resilience and well-being as well as the organization's success. The theoretical framework illustrates ways in which - Positive Organisational Behaviour (POB) and Positive Organisational Scholarship (POS) - can be extrapolated to enhance the effectiveness of mentorship in an ODeL context. POB and POS are two fields in organizational behaviour and theory that are primarily based on positive psychology (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Positive organizational behaviour seeks to improve employee performance and organizational competitive advantage by focusing on strengths and psychological capacities that are positive, measurable, developable, and performance-related, focusing on four key components: self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resiliency (Luthans &Avolio, 2009; Ko & Donaldson, 2011). Positive constructs seem to have relevance and on outcomes in the mentorship process, especially, how they apply to the emerging work in the area of authentic leadership and its development (Luthans & Avolio, 2009). POS emphasizes that professing positive constructs, such as compassion and gratitude, can help today's organizations grow and flourish; it is based on the idea that organizations can grow further by determining the factors which boost positive behaviour, for example, in the process of mentoring. Dutton, Glynn and Spreitzer (2008) mention three core aspects of a POS perspective: (1) a concern with flourishing; (2) a focus on the development of strengths or capabilities; and (3) an emphasis on the generative, life-giving dynamics of organizing. These are characterized by "hope, joy and gratitude, interest, inspiration, and pride where creating abundance and human well-being are key indicators of success" (Froman, 2010).

3. Methodology

The research was guided by the qualitative research method using a phenomenological paradigm. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) define a paradigm as a perspective or way of looking at reality. Wentzel (2016) also describes it as a model for observation and understanding which shapes what we see and how we understand it. Phenomenology is a study of personal experience; it refers to a description or interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in an investigation (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Litchman (2013) states that it is used to describe and understand the essence of the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon. In this case, all the participants had experience of working within an ODeL institution, in a mentee-mentor relationship.

The qualitative approach gave the researchers an opportunity to note down and understand the participants through the explanations directly solicited from their understanding of reality. It is suitable for this research because it is concerned with conditions that exist, beliefs, attributes that are held and trends that can emerge concerning the issue under study (Rahi, 2017). A qualitative approach, thus, allows researchers to obtain the feelings, concerns and viewpoints of the mentors and mentees on the strategies for effective mentorship in an ODeL context. The study used investigator triangulation by involving multiple researchers in the data collection and analysis (all four authors were involved). The different researchers, hence, brought different perspectives and reduced individual biases in interpreting the data. The researchers understand that in qualitative research, triangulation is more about enriching the understanding and interpretation of complex, context-specific data rather than statistical validation (Lim, 2024).

The population in this study comprised of senior academics (mentors) and junior academics (mentees) in an institution that offers ODeL. The sample consists of 15 mentors and 15 mentees in the ODeL institution. McCombes (2021) states that a sample is a small proportion of a population selected for observation and analysis. The researchers chose the participants according to their profiles and relevance to the issue of ODeL, thus, purposive sampling was used to choose the 15 mentors and 15 mentees. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) support the use of purposive sampling by pointing out that this approach enables a researcher to handpick the participants to be included in the sample on the basis of his/her judgment of their suitability, thereby, creating a sample that is beneficial to the research.

Data collection was done through the use of one-time semi-structured interviews which lasted 40-60 minutes each; interview questions are detailed in Appendix 1. Ainsworth (2021) supports the use of semi-structured interviews in that several key questions that cover a wider scope of issues can be explored. The researcher is thus able to make follow-ups and solicit clarity by asking clarifying questions. The interview sessions were recorded. The researchers ensured validity through expert review, seeking insights from other experienced researchers about the interview schedule's relevance and adequacy for the research objectives. Furthermore, content

validity ensured that the interview schedule covered all relevant aspects of the research questions. Reliability was ensured through consistency in the administration of the interview - they were conducted uniformly to avoid introducing variability.

The thematic approach was used to analyze the data. Thematic data analysis involves an attempt to comprehend the phenomenon under study, by synthesizing information, and explaining any relationships and connecting the data to what is known (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2014). Flick (2018) describes qualitative data analysis as a process of organizing data into categories. **M**ultiple (all four) researchers were involved in the coding process to ensure inter-coder reliability. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved to ensure consistent interpretation of the data. Findings and interpretations were shared with participants to validate that the data accurately reflects their perspectives and experiences. The data was grouped or coded with headings for easy analysis and a clear descriptive analysis of the data, from the emerging themes, was done; after the thematic analysis, the electronic data was stored in an encrypted folder. Ethical considerations such as - informed consent, privacy and confidentiality as well as voluntary participation and disclosure - were taken into account in the study.

4. Findings

The data from the participants gathered from the interviews (see questions in Appendix 1) was analyzed and four themes were generated. These findings show the diverse perspectives and experiences of participants with regard to mentoring in an ODeL higher education institution. They show the importance of support, benefits of mentoring, the challenges faced and provide significant recommendations for improving the mentorship programmes.

4.1 Effective Mentorship Support

Participants stated that they have received support in various forms from their mentees, helping them to create a relevant mentoring experience. The mentorship they received was in areas of teaching and learning, research, community engagement and university service.

Participant A stated:

> "*The support I am receiving from my mentor is enormous. Since I joined UNISA, my mentor keeps on taking me through various things that are done at UNISA. Firstly, on teaching and learning, she taught me the LMS that is used at UNISA, research and innovation, she encourages me to attend conferences and write articles. She also takes time to review my article draft. She also encourages me to actively engage in community engagements and be an active academic citizen through joining organizations for academics both locally and internationally.*"

> "*Working together. My mentor is always available and supportive. He always gives me constructive feedback that includes both criticism and praise. He provides support and advice to me on supervision, and he also offers support*

by being present during supervision meetings with my M and D students. Currently, he is also co-supervising with me 2 PhD students, teaching me, patiently, the tricks of supervision, and this has really boosted my confidence in supervision." Participant B narrated.

Not all the participants, however, shared the same sentiments as Participant C reported, "*Teaching and Learning activities. I have not received any support.*"

4.2 Challenges in Mentoring Relationships
Several participants highlighted various obstacles they faced in their mentoring relationships, including - lack of communication, failure to set realistic goals and timelines, lack of time, academic jealousy, lack of resources and mismatched expectations.

Participant A reported:
"*I have encountered a few challenges. For instance, when you find that your mentor is not familiar with your research field because her research field is different from yours. As much as she provides feedback on your writing, I sometimes pick [sic] some deficiencies because of a difference in our research field.*"

Participant B expressed: "*You are not involved in the process, but you will be requested to fill in the forms of mentee and mentor just to confirm that there is such a thing. In reality, there is no mentoring relationship.*"

Participant F stated: "*I have never met my mentor in person. She is a busy person, and it is hard to find her even on her phone. She has many commitments, and that includes committing herself to mentoring me.*"

Participant A blamed the ODeL nature of the institution for obstacles to effective mentoring, stating: "*Dishonesty, lack of communication, and not being inclusive. We are working from home, where there is no physical interaction with other colleagues, including my mentor.*"

4.3 Qualities of Successful Mentees
Participants emphasized the following qualities of a successful mentee: being a good listener, an independent thinker, a decision-maker, and a committed individual.

Participant I stated: "*Dedication, volunteering, and a desire to learn.*"

Participant J highlighted: "*Active good listener, providing honest feedback, knowledgeable, being kind, having a respectful attitude, and being passionate about helping others.*"

4.4 Organisational Strategies for Effective Mentorship
Participants suggested different strategies that can be used to improve the effectiveness of mentorship in higher education institutions, such as - developing

open mentorship policies, implementing incentives for mentoring, providing training and resources, promoting inclusivity and transparency, and organizing events to facilitate interaction between mentees and mentors.

Participant K suggested: *"The institution should develop an open policy towards mentoring. For example, mentoring should not be limited to Professors because it becomes a burden to them. Mentees should be able to arrange meetings with mentors without facing scheduling conflicts."*

"There should be incentives for progressive mentoring relationships and a monitoring mechanism in place to detect shadow-mentoring relationships." Participant L recommended.

Participant M proposed: *"Provide more training, resources, and support and implement specific mentoring programmes for distance-learning instructors."*

"Inclusive and transparent strategy. The university should organize conferences or events where mentors and their mentees can interact and build relationships." Participant N emphasized.

Participant O recommended: *"Mentoring should be continuous, and mentors and mentees should rotate to expose mentees to different mentors with different skills."*

Participant Q suggested: *"Continuous training and advance planning for mentors and mentees to ensure clarity and effectiveness in mentorship relationships."*

Participant R called for a more structured approach, stating*:*
> *"Mentees must be provided an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with their mentors if they are achieving what they wanted to achieve from their mentors. Also, mentorship should be monitored by the Management of the University to assess its effectiveness. Additionally, academics should be trained on mentorship expectations to ensure mentors are well-prepared for their roles."*

5. Discussion

This paper set out to explore the experiences of academics in an ODeL higher education institution regarding mentoring. The data collected was analyzed, and four themes emerged, elaborating on the support needed, benefits and challenges of mentoring. The participants shared their experiences on - mentoring support, challenges in mentoring relationships, qualities of successful mentees / mentors, organizational strategies for effective mentorship, as well as suggestions for mentorship improvement. These experiences shared by the participants have shed light on how mentorship programmes may be enhanced in ODeL institutions of higher education.

Participants shared the pivotal nature of mentorship in their careers. They stated that they have received support in different areas of their academic careers which include - teaching and learning, research, engaged scholarship, and university services. Most participants, literally reiterated that this support played an essential role in helping them get a sense of belonging in the academic world, however, some advocated for equity in mentorship as they have not received the same level of support as others.

As this study's theoretical framework states, positive organisational scholarship postulates that organisations can grow further by determining which factors boost positive behaviour, for example, in the process of mentoring (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). This finding proves that mentorship plays a crucial role in the participants' careers, giving them support in all of the University pillars. As mentioned in the literature, Merga and Mason (2021) found that co-researching and co-authoring studies, by mentors and mentees, advance the mentees' competence and fosters an excellent mentor-mentee relationship. This is consistent with Ibukunolu's 2017 study where he found that a well-structured meaningful relationship between mentor and mentee, in the higher education sector, has a positive impact on mentee research productivity and career prospects. There is, however, a need to put effort into ensuring that mentors and mentees are equally supported and well-equipped for what they are expected to do, as some participants complained about not having received the level of support others have received. Institutions of higher education must consider allocating more resources to develop mentorship initiatives, to ensure that all beginning academics have access to mentorship and are supported accordingly, regardless of their background or specialization. Establishing policies that promote mentorship can be a good start, as paying attention to this can contribute to the success of divers levels of academics, in their institutions.

Unfortunately, relationships in some mentoring initiatives encounter certain challenges. Participants identified some of them as - poor communication, unrealistic goal setting, time constraints, academic jealousy, limited resources and mismatched expectations. These challenges concur with those outlined by Bailey, Voiles, Finkelstein and Matarazzo (2016) who also found that tension sometimes exists between mentors and mentees. The participants stated that these challenges are exacerbated by the nature of this institution since they work remotely. It is, hence, imperative, that for an effective mentorship relationship, well-defined forms of communication are established and maintained if the relationship is to succeed. Mentees and mentors must set goals together; these goals must be achievable and they must be within the mentees' capabilities, therefore, clear communication of these expectations is vital, as failure to do so could result in challenges, particularly, in a distance learning environment. Mentorship requires both the mentor and mentee to devote time and effort to ensure that their mentorship relationship succeeds, stressed Merga and Mason (2021).

The findings of this study show that one essential key to effective mentorship lies in the qualities of the people involved. Key qualities outlined by the participants, that

they believe would make mentorship thrive, include mentees who are - attentive and active listeners, independent thinkers, decision-makers, committed individuals, dedicated learners with a desire to progress and with similar academic interests to their mentors. According to the participants, these characteristics must be supported by - honesty, knowledge, kindness, respect and a passion for helping others – from the mentors' side. Both parties must, therefore, be cognisant of these qualities in their mentoring approaches and relationships. Brannagan and Oriol (2014) similarly believe that effective mentorship arrangements, in higher education, should ensure that the mentor and mentee are paired based on their educational background and course assignments. These findings should give guidance to mentors, mentees and departments when they are making mentorship arrangements.

The participants stated that it is also possible to enhance the effectiveness of mentorship in higher education institutions by developing open mentorship policies, providing incentives, offering training and providing resources, promoting inclusivity and organizing events to facilitate mentor-mentee interactions. Participants further recommended that - continuous mentorship with rotation to expose mentees to a variety of skills, regular communication, planning in advance, continuous training and monitoring and supporting of mentorship – would all facilitate the process. The findings show that mentorship is recognized as being essential in higher education institutions, hence, they should ensure that they have strategies in place to enhance the initiative. These recommendations, definitely, have the potential to help support novice academics in their professional careers.

6. Conclusion

In this research article, we shared the experiences of academics, on mentorship, in an Open and Distance e-Learning higher education institution. After analysis of the data collected from the participants, key themes that emerged were – factors in offering mentoring support, challenges in mentoring relationships, qualities of successful mentees and mentors and organizational strategies for effective mentorship. This study gives a comprehensive overview of mentorship in an ODeL higher education context. The experiences shared by the participants have provided valuable information that would assist in creating successful mentorship programmes in ODeL institutions, thereby, facilitating effective support to beginning academics to assist them in their growth. These findings further indicate the need for mentoring initiatives that are well-designed in order to appropriately meet the needs of academics and the institution, ultimately. Training for mentors so that they can provide constructive feedback, understand mentees' developmental and professional needs could also be helpful. More resources such as - enough quality time for mentoring; access to materials and technology; as well as establishing ways to assess mentorship programmes regularly- could improve mentoring activities. Addressing the needs of mentoring would assist not only the academics, but the institution as well as its core pillars would be positively impacted, and its employees would be more productive and successful. This would in turn reduce many challenges, such as unrealistic expectations and inadequate resources, especially, because it is typical for

employees to work remotely in ODeL institutions. ODeL institutions must therefore prioritise having policies that support mentorship initiatives, and furthermore, allocate resources for these initiatives. With all these recommendations taken into account, institutions would create an environment that would result in the success and well-being of the academics. To build on these findings, avenues for future research could include comparative studies of different ODeL institutions in different contexts, or investigating the corelation between improved mentoring and institutional success. Findings from such studies can further assist institutions in refining their mentoring programmes and in creating conducive environments for professional growth.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions	
Mentors	**Mentees**
Background	
-Can you describe your background and experience with mentorship in an ODeL context and how long have you been involved in mentoring within the ODeL setting?	Can you describe your experience with mentorship in ODeL, and how did you first get involved with your mentor, and what were your initial expectations?
Qualities of a successful mentor/mentee	
In your view, what are the key qualities that make a mentee successful in an ODeL setting and how do you assess these qualities in your mentees?	In your view, what are the key qualities of an effective mentor in an ODeL setting and how does your mentor demonstrate these qualities in your interactions?
Support	
What types of support and resources do you believe are necessary for effective mentorship in an ODeL setting, and how do you use these resources to enhance your mentoring?	What types of support and guidance have been most beneficial to you from your mentor, and how does your mentor address your academic and professional needs?

Challenges	
What are the main challenges you face while mentoring in an ODeL context? Please provide examples of how you have addressed these challenges?	What challenges have you faced in your mentorship relationship, and how has your mentor helped you navigate these challenges?
Feedback, suggestions/recommendations for improvement	
How do you gather feedback from your mentees about the mentorship process? And based on this feedback, what changes have you made to your mentorship approach? What recommendations would you give to other mentors working in ODeL institutions to improve their mentoring effectiveness? Are there any specific strategies or practices you would recommend for enhancing mentorship in the South African ODeL context?	How do you provide feedback to your mentor about the mentoring process? Are there aspects of the mentorship relationship that you feel could be improved? If so, how? What suggestions would you offer for improving mentorship programmes in ODeL institutions? How can mentors better support mentees in the South African ODeL context?