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Unpacking effective mentorship practices for early career academics: a mixed-methods study

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Abstract

Purpose

Mentoring can be an important source of support, particularly for those who are in the early stages of their career in academia. Drawing upon data from a larger study, we investigated opportunities for mentorship, factors that hinder or support mentorship, and the value of mentorship from the perspective of early career academics (ECAs).

Design

Using a mixed-methods approach and social identity theory, we collected data via a survey and follow-up interviews with members of staff at the Open University, of which 19 ECA experiences were contrasted with 17 academics who received mentorship but were not early career.

Findings

ECAs and non-ECAs had equal access to mentoring, but mentoring seemed to be more visible and accessible to ECAs. Factors deemed to support mentorship included mentors having empathy and confidentiality. Mentorship was valued by ECAs because it helped to provide them with support that was in addition to their line management and to help them make sense of “being an academic”. From the data presented, mentorship supported ECAs in their academic career and identity development in higher education.

Originality

This research provides a mixed-methods approach to investigating early career mentoring within the context of a higher education institution in the United Kingdom. It considers the topic of mentoring of both junior and more senior staff who are often working at a distance to the institutional setting and provides a theoretical perspective in terms of social identity for academics.

Keywords

Mentorship, Early career academics (ECAs), Mixed-methods approach, Social identity, Professional development

Introduction

Early career academics (ECAs) go through many transitions in the early stages of their career (Mittelmeier *et al.*, 2018; Sutherland-Smith *et al.*, 2011). We define ECAs as individuals who have a maximum of 5 years' academic teaching and/or research experience following the completion of their PhD. There are several routes that ECAs can take to further their careers (Jindal-Snape and Ingram, 2013; Spurk *et al.*, 2015). For those who want to stay in academia, a “teacher route”, “researcher route”, or combined “teacher–researcher route” is present with substantial challenges, uncertainties, and risks (Kalyani *et al.*, 2015; Mittelmeier *et al.*, 2018).

A variety of studies have reported substantial pressures on ECAs in academia. For example, in a recent large-scale survey of 4,267 academics, the Wellcome Trust (2020) found that 70% of respondents reported being stressed at work and having mental health issues. Furthermore, more than two-thirds of ECAs felt insecure in pursuing a research career, and a substantial number of ECAs indicated a desire to leave academia. It would seem that when ECAs are uncertain about their own roles, identities, and careers, this could have substantial negative impacts on supporting their career transitions (Rienties and Hosein, 2020; Sutherland-Smith *et al.*, 2011).

One potential solution to these complex issues is to provide mentorship to ECAs from an experienced faculty member. ECAs, in particular, can benefit from mentorship to navigate challenges in academic and non-academic life and career development. For example, Etkorn and Braddock (2020) highlighted in the United States (US) how there was a desire by junior faculty to receive mentoring and that they valued the approach in aiding them to support their tenure positions.

The term mentoring has been interpreted in a variety of different ways. As Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) argued, mentoring definitions seem to lack clear boundaries around functions and support roles. For the sake of this article, we use the Healy and Welchert (1990) definition

of mentoring as “a dynamic and reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé or mentee) aimed at promoting the career development of both” (p. 19). While this is not a definitive definition, it does encapsulate the key element of career development and reciprocal learning within the mentoring process and is the focus of this paper.

Although mentoring, as demonstrated above, is important, mentoring scholars have tended to lack a contemporary theoretical foundation to their work. In particular, Rudick and Dannels (2019) argued that current mentoring theories and models fail to address how various social identities may impact the function, effectiveness, and stability of mentoring relationships, especially for ECAs. As such, exploring theoretical approaches that have gained considerable grounding in areas outside of mentoring are important to explore not only to expand the theoretical reach of mentoring in higher education, but also to expand the knowledge base. In this paper, we deploy the theoretical approach of social identity theory to explore mentorship practices for ECAs.

In a review of mentoring literature between 1985 and 2019, Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) argued that a traditional sense of mentoring often “pairs a senior and junior (i.e., mentoring dyad) in a support-based ‘intensive relationship’ that guides mentees (i.e., protégés) through career advancement and psychosocial development” (p. 21). Alternative mentorship arrangements would include informal, peer-to-peer, collegial, and friendship mentoring (Fayram *et al.*, 2018; Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021). The benefits of mentoring relationships have been documented in the empirical literature (Allen and Eby, 2011; Ragins and Kram, 2007) and include contributing towards growth and development in work attitudes and career outcomes. Mentors for ECAs may play out different roles such as a teacher, guide, or collaborator. As Bäker *et al.* (2020) found, mentees who perceive their mentors as sponsors who extend their social networks are most successful. In other words, successful mentors in

academia are seen as those that serve the role of a “broker” between mentees and their community and facilitate the mentees’ integration into that community. Furthermore, as recently argued by Mullen and Klimaitis (2021), there are gaps in the literature “about the intensity and deeper learning based on mentoring research across disciplines” (p. 23). More specifically, as Etzkorn and Braddock (2020) highlighted, few previous studies have looked at the mentoring perceptions of both junior and more senior faculty.

Despite these benefits, mentoring support is not always easy to access, in particular for ECAs. Institution-wide mentoring programmes have often struggled with obtaining sufficient mentors to sustain the programmes (Angelique *et al.*, 2002), and the lack of time to meet with a mentor is problematic (Ehrich *et al.*, 2004; Marino, 2021). As a result, what could be described as “informal” or “ad hoc” relationships between a mentor and mentee are sometimes formed to address the lack of a formalised or broader mentoring structure.

Social identity theory

According to social identity theory, people derive part of their identity from the groups in which they belong (e.g., identity as an “academic” or “cyclist”) (Atkins *et al.*, 2020; Pozzi *et al.*, 2020; Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019). Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from a person’s knowledge of their membership in a social group(s) together with the value or emotional significance attached to that membership. As such, social identity theory has both a psychological and motivational component. Being an academic is one form of identity, which for many academics is an important social identity (Daniel, 2018; Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019; Sutherland-Smith *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, many academics have a strong affinity and bond with their own discipline, and often describe their own identity as being part of a disciplinary group, such as being a “sociologist” or “computer scientist”. As noted in a range of studies, clear distinct disciplinary boundaries may, on the one hand, strengthen bonds and relations between academics who are

part of the same discipline, but at the same time, they might hamper developing relationships with academics from other disciplines (Daniel, 2018; Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021; Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019).

When an ECA joins a new institution, they try to make sense of the formal and informal culture, norms, and traditions within that department or discipline which can be, at times, troublesome. By building a relationship with colleagues, ECAs often aim to “fit in” within the group or discipline, make sense of what is expected from them, and develop their own social identity. For example, Thomas *et al.* (2020) indicated that many of the 10 beginning teachers in Belgium went through diverse complex transitions in a year-long study. Those who effectively managed their network relations and actively built and maintained networks with both experienced colleagues and others outside the school were more able to successfully make their transition. Similar findings were reported by Rienties and Hosein (2020), whereby 114 ECAs were followed for a year at one university in the United Kingdom (UK). Strong disciplinary relations were present, but a professional development programme also allowed ECAs to build new academic relations and to make sense of their new work life.

As argued in the mentor literature, providing a formal or informal mentor can help ECAs to make sense of these new worlds. It would also seem that we are beginning to develop a picture of perceptions of online mentoring for ECAs. For example, Dorner *et al.* (2021) argued that a mentor’s physical presence was crucial in order to provide meaningful support for novice teachers.

In a review of mentorship practices in 16 Australian universities with 32 in-depth interviews with senior leaders and ECAs, Sutherland-Smith *et al.* (2011) found that senior leaders were mostly positive about the systematic provision of mentorship, helping ECAs to “learn the ropes of academia and provide some measurable means of professional development” (p. 332). In contrast, most ECAs considered mentorship as a tick-box exercise

and to encourage them to develop a 24/7 academic identity, whether (or not) this fitted with their goals, ambitions, and needs. In seeking to understand the construction of identity in academic communities, Hoang and Pretorius (2019) argued that it is useful to consider the concept of affordance. Academics working within the same institution may perceive opportunities provided by their institutions differently. For instance, some may take advantage of institutional opportunities such as mentoring, whereas others may consider these as a burden to their work. Thus, an understanding of affordances enables an understanding of participants' decision-making in their working context. In this context, considering the affordances of mentoring, as perceived by those who experience it, enables us to explore their appropriated identities as academic mentees and mentors.

Research questions

Several empirical studies have found support for mentoring practices in areas of higher education. However, how and why ECAs develop and nurture mentorship over time has received relatively limited attention, in particular in comparison to other academics who receive mentorship. Therefore, using the lens of social identity theory in this rich, triangulated, mixed-methods study, we aimed to explore how ECAs make sense of mentorship and explore their experiences through the following questions:

1. To what extent are mentoring opportunities available for ECAs relative to other academics?
2. How do ECAs perceive the factors that support or hinder mentorship?
3. What is the perceived value of mentoring from the perspective of ECAs?

Methodology

Setting and participants

This study took place at a distance learning provider in the UK, namely, the Open University (OU). The OU is one of the largest universities in the UK in terms of student population. The OU's mission is to make education accessible to everyone regardless of their background (e.g., for most undergraduate modules, no formal qualifications are required). Around 1,000+ central OU staff are located in Milton Keynes, while around 5,000+ staff are located in the four nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales). Therefore, a distributed work practice model is used, whereby most staff work together via distance learning methods, with occasional face-to-face meetings on campus.

Procedure

Using approved data and following institutional ethical approval, a random sample of 200 central staff across the four main faculties was extracted, whereby 56% of the sample consisted of women. This was a subsection of 200 staff from the staff population. All participants were informed of the study information and completed informed consent forms. Names used in this study are pseudonyms. In phase 1 of this study, we distributed an online survey via email, with one reminder message during the period May to June 2020. A total of 67 (33%) members of staff completed the survey, 19 of whom were ECAs. In phase 2 of the study, we specifically sampled participants in two groups (i.e., ECAs and academic staff who received mentorship but who were not ECAs) for follow-up semi-structured interviews.

We defined ECAs as working for less than 5 years at the institute in a non-senior role (i.e., senior lecturer or above). We identified ECAs by asking how long they worked at the institute, whether they were on probation, and their respective job role. To ensure comparability between the sample to compare the ECA experiences with academic staff who also received

mentorship but were not ECAs, we only included staff who were either ECAs or received mentorship, thereby excluding participants who did not receive any mentorship (nine) or gave mentorship (22). Therefore, our sample (from those who completed the survey) consisted of 36 participants, whereby 19 respondents were classified as ECA and 17 respondents were identified as non-ECAs but receiving mentorship. For the remainder of this paper, we refer to this later group as academic mentees.

Phase 1: Online mentor survey

Building on the theoretical model described above, we developed an online mentor survey to explore the mentoring within this institute. The survey consisted of 19 items, whereby seven closed questions (e.g., “On a Likert response scale of 1–5, what status does mentoring have at the OU?”) and eight open questions (e.g., “What do you think are the most successful elements of receiving mentorship?” and “If the Open University developed a university wide mentorship scheme, what elements of successful mentorship should be included?”). We subdivided the questionnaire into a mentee part (i.e., “In the past 3 years, have you received mentoring from within the Open University?”) and a mentor part (i.e., “In the past 3 years, have you been a mentor of a colleague at the Open University?”). Participants therefore received different questions depending on their experiences of mentorship.

In total, 14 (73%) of ECA respondents identified as female, while 11 (65%) of academic mentees identified as female. On average, ECAs had worked at the OU for 1.76 years (SD = 1.23, range 0–4 years), while academic mentees had worked at the OU for 12.82 years (SD = 4.82, range 5–20 years). There were 10 lecturers, six staff tutors (i.e., academic members of staff who were responsible for managing associate lecturers at the OU), one associate lecturer, one researcher, and one unknown amongst the ECA cohort. Amongst the academic mentees, there were three professors or heads of units, six senior lecturers, five lecturers, and two staff tutors.

Follow-up analysis of non-response bias indicated no significant differences in terms of gender and discipline. Beyond analysing the survey data using SPSS 24, the qualitative comments were analysed thematically using NVivo 11 to explore common themes. For the first stage of the thematic analysis, the first author provided an initial summary of coding and possible themes which were constructed from the data. These codes were then reviewed and confirmed by the second author for accuracy and reliability. In the next stage, the themes were combined to develop an overarching coding book of common themes. The coding of the survey data informed the construction of interview questions for phase 2.

Phase 2: Interviews

RQ2 and RQ3 focused on a more in-depth understanding of what factors support or hinder mentorship and the value of mentorship. We used a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011; Rienties and Hosein, 2020) by inviting selected participants to in-depth interviews to illuminate and triangulate the patterns from the data analysis in phase 1. In line with Mittelmeier *et al.* (2018), participants were purposefully sampled based on both their quantitative (i.e., status of mentorship, access to mentorship) and qualitative responses in phase 1 in three distinct groups (1 = low, 2 = high, 3 = “mixed” response) in order to further unpack their different perspectives and voices. In total, 27 participants were invited to an online interview and 21 participated, which was a response rate of 78%. Six ECAs participated in the interviews.

Due to COVID-19 and the nature of the OU, it was not possible to conduct interviews in person. Therefore, Skype for Business was used in a private online room, recorded with participant approval, and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were open and semi-structured in nature, allowing participants to direct the flow of conversations as to what was important to their own experiences and creating opportunities for conversations between participants. The interviews were recorded and initially transcribed by Otter.ai and afterwards

checked by both the first and second authors for clarity. These transcriptions were then coded and analysed using thematic analysis in line with the method suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). NVivo software was used to initially code the data before a second phase of focused coding. These codes were discussed between the two authors in order to construct themes. In this way, key themes that were expressed by the interviewees were triangulated with the data from phase 1 to develop a more in-depth understanding of the mentorship practices.

Results and findings

Phase 1: online survey

Quantitative results

In terms of RQ1, and therefore the extent of mentoring opportunities available to ECAs, 17 (89%) of 19 ECAs indicated they had received mentorship in the last 3 years. Looking towards the perceived value of mentoring (RQ3), nine (47%) ECAs were positive about the status of mentorship at the university, three (16%) were neutral, two (11%) thought that mentorship was unimportant, and five (26%) indicated “Don’t know”. Four of 17 (23%) academic mentees indicated that mentorship was regarded as important at the university, with seven academic mentees selecting the neutral option, three thinking it was unimportant, and three indicating “Don’t know”. All ECAs were supportive of the statement that “All academic staff, regardless of career stage or responsibilities, should be able to access mentoring”, while 88% of academic mentees agreed with this statement.

Unsurprisingly, using ANOVAs, the number of years that ECAs were employed at the institute was significantly shorter relative to academic mentees ($F = 93.199, p < .001, \eta^2 = .733$), and in more junior roles ($F = 10.986, p < .01, \eta^2 = .250$). However, from our quantitative analysis, we did not find any significant differences in terms of status ($M_{ECA} = 3.57, SD_{ECA} = 0.85, M_{AM} = 3.07, SD_{AM} = 1.00, p = n.s$) and access to mentorship ($M_{ECA} = 4.84, SD_{ECA} = 0.37,$

$M_{AM} = 4.53$, $SD_{AM} = 1.07$, $p = n.s$) between ECAs and academic mentees, as indicated in Table 1. Furthermore, no significant differences were found in terms of discipline and gender between ECAs and academic mentees. Overall, the quantitative results indicated that both in terms of access to mentorship schemes (RQ1) and their perceived value, ECAs and academic mentees (RQ3) had similar perspectives.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and ANOVA for ECAs and academic mentees

	ECA		Academic Mentee		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
What status does mentoring have at the OU? (1–5)	3.57	0.85	3.07	1.00	2.035
All academic staff members, regardless of career stage or responsibilities, should be able to access mentoring (1–5)	4.84	0.37	4.53	1.07	1.437
Years working at the institute	1.77	1.24	12.82	4.82	93.199**
Are you still in your 4-year OU academic employment probation period? (yes/no)	0.84	0.38	0.00	0.00	80.457**
FACULTY 1 (yes/no)	0.32	0.48	0.18	0.39	.900
FACULTY 2 (yes/no)	0.11	0.32	0.12	0.33	.013
FACULTY 3 (yes/no)	0.16	0.37	0.18	0.39	.021
FACULTY 4 (yes/no)	0.42	0.51	0.47	0.51	.084
Male (yes/no)	0.26	0.45	0.35	0.49	.325
Seniority (1–7)	2.83	0.51	4.06	1.48	10.986**

Note: ** $p < .01$

Qualitative results

When comparing the open comments from the survey between those classified under our definition of ECAs and non-ECAs, it was interesting that despite the findings outlined above, mentoring seemed to be more visible and accessible to ECAs. Receiving mentoring did not seem as visible or viewed as necessary for senior colleagues. For example, quotes included “I’m not aware of any mentoring at the OU” (Participant 6, Female, Faculty 1, survey), “I am a senior academic who would rather mentor newer and younger colleagues” (Participant 31, Male, Faculty 2, survey) and “I have not felt it to be required. I have been an academic for over 35 years” (Participant 61, Male, Faculty 3, survey), which give an overview of their

perspectives. Indeed, non-ECAs saw the value of mentoring but felt that it currently lacked the status that it deserved, and it seemed quite ad hoc in nature. For example, they described mentoring to be a “little patchy and carried out in a very uneven manner” (Participant 7, Female, Faculty 1, survey) or “at present mentoring is not consistent or adequately recognised by the OU” (Participant 19, Female, Faculty 1, survey).

In respect to RQ2 and the perceived factors that hindered mentorship, a key theme found in the open comments of the survey for those non-ECA colleagues was that they either lacked time to mentor or they lacked time recognition in formal workload management processes. As such, lacking time and time not being appropriately recognised was a factor that hindered mentorship. This is illustrated by the open comments in terms of academics stating that “there is insufficient time for academics to be effective mentors as the work is not properly recognised in workload plans or reward schemes” (Participant 11, Male, Faculty 3, survey).

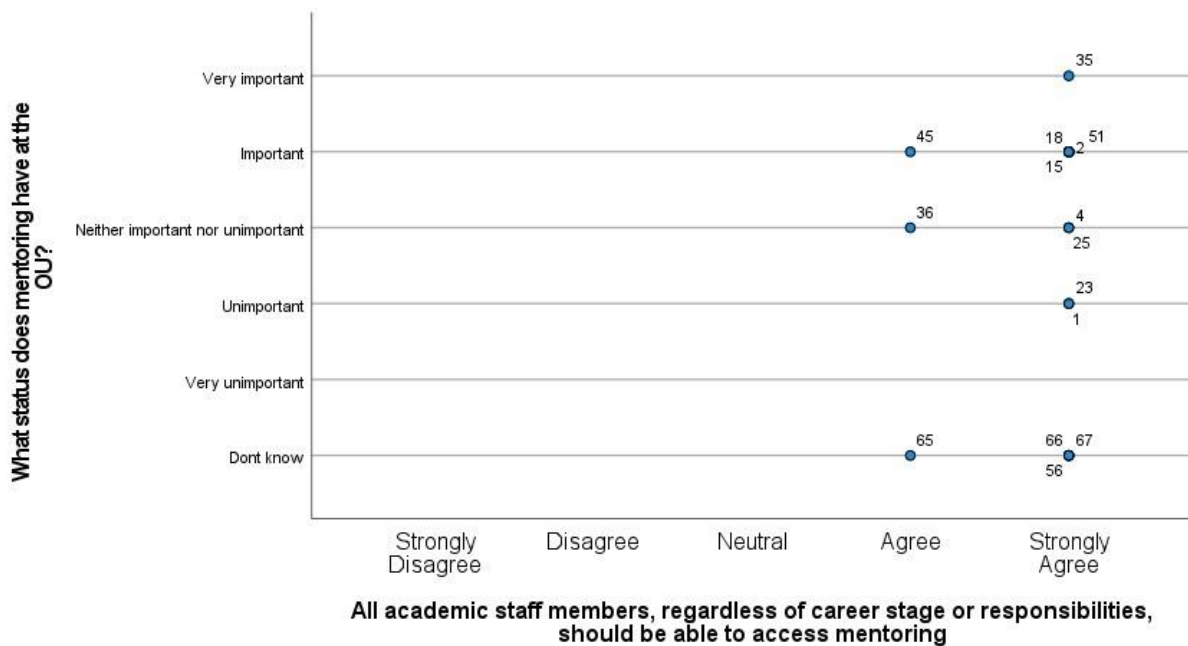
Empathy was an important and prevalent factor of successful mentoring for non-ECAs that would support the mentoring relationship. As seen below, showing empathy was also seen as an important mentoring skill for ECAs. However, not all the aspects above were always seen as prevalent for ECAs. For example, feeling and having support from another colleague, relationship building, distinguishing mentoring as both formal and informal in nature, and seeking to gain clarity about their role as an academic came up more for the ECAs. For example, ECAs highlighted how they found having a mentor “psychologically reassuring” (Participant 66, Female, Faculty 4, survey) and that “it helped me learn how to do my job and integrate into the immediate team” (Participant 25, Male, Faculty 2, survey). As such, it was useful to explore some of these differences further within the interviews in phase 2.

Phase 2: follow-up interviews

For phase 2, we specifically selected ECA participants for interviews based upon their respective quantitative and qualitative responses in phase 1. As illustrated in Figure 1, while

all ECAs agreed that staff members should be able to access mentoring, there were some differences in terms of the perceived status of mentoring at the university. In the section that follows we present the themes from the interview data. Namely, these pertain to answering RQ2: attributes of successful mentoring experiences, hindering factors and negative elements of mentoring, sources of support, benefits of mentoring, and relationship building.

Figure 1 Scatterplot of perceived status and access to mentoring according to ECRs



Attributes of successful mentoring experiences

The findings demonstrated several factors that ECAs found supported their mentorship experiences in terms of the attributes of a successful mentor. Aspects that came across strongly in the data were the mentor’s approachability, empathy, and accessibility in terms of their time. For example, in relation to the support of the mentor in encouraging reflection, an ECA noted that “the one big thing with my mentor is they valued what I brought to the table” (Participant 51, Female, Faculty 4, interview) and that “for me, there was great reassurance of it, simply knowing there was somebody I could email” (Participant 2, Male, Faculty 1, interview). It was encouraging to see that these findings were also supported by ECAs in comments from the survey.

Hindering factors and negative elements of mentoring

Some of the attributes associated with negative or unsuccessful mentoring experiences were the relevant fit of the mentor to the mentee and having time in their workload to give to the mentoring experience. For example, an element that was captured across the qualitative data in terms of the survey and the interviews is that mentoring was often viewed as a voluntary activity, and when asked, none of the ECAs captured the time they spent either being a mentor or a mentee in any formal way. There was a perception that because mentoring did not tend to be formally recognised in terms of an individual's time capturing, or the visibility of the university's recognition, this could hinder mentoring as it relied on the good will and voluntary time of the mentor. One ECA nicely summarised this "hidden" time:

It's the willingness, the openness, the kind of readiness of people to step in and help and the way they do it is difficult to capture. Because people will never come forward and say, look I've spent so much time in mentoring, they will never say it. (Participant 18, Female, Faculty 4, interview)

It therefore seemed that because mentoring was not always recognised in terms of time allocation, it just became part and parcel of the job and identity of an academic.

Source of support: making sense of "being an academic"

One area of value for ECAs was the role of the mentor in aiding them to make sense of academia and getting to know the nuances of the role (i.e., research, teaching, or admin time). This seemed particularly pertinent when staff members were new to either their roles or to the university as ECAs. For example, one of the ECAs explained this support in terms of gaining clarity on her role:

[My mentor] sat down with me and showed me how to do things, tasks I had to complete and they took a lot of time, they devoted a lot of time in mentoring me in the ways of working that I've found that has been the most precious type of mentoring.

It's not just when you first join, which is where it's paramount that other colleagues step in and devote their time to show you how to do things quickly, how to get on with things, what to spend your time on, how to prioritise your time and so on. (Participant 18, Female, Faculty 4, interview)

The same ECA later expanded upon how the mentoring experience also helped her develop confidence and reflection of her work and role:

It [mentoring] gives you a bit of confidence. It makes you feel part of our broader community. It helps you with those feelings of isolation that, especially in academia and in a distance learning University, we all kind of often suffer from ... the main thing with mentoring that I have found useful is that time, the kind of motivation it gives you to step back a bit and say, "okay this is what I have been doing". "How have I been doing it?" "Is there anything else I would like do?" (Participant 18, Female, Faculty 4, interview)

This perspective was further elaborated by an ECA in terms of sharing experiences of how other members of staff structure their time:

They were able to give me a sort of narrative of where they went and how they did it. That was invaluable really because I think, coming in particularly as a new academic, I'd never had a full-time academic position. Just the idea of these hours in the morning to keep for research, how to protect them. (Participant 2, Male, Faculty 1, interview)

The aspect of being able to make sense of their academic roles as mentioned by Participant 2 above was also discussed by Participant 23 in terms of mentoring for specific topics such as research:

The main one [area] that I really benefit from is having some support in terms of developing some of my work into academic publications ... I've started being a bit

more proactive and getting some of my academic things pushed forward. (Participant 23, Female, Faculty 1, interview)

Even though Participant 23 viewed the status of mentoring at a university level unimportant (as shown in Figure 1), their personal opinion was that it was important for supporting research. As a result, the mentor became a valued source of information for those ECAs who either were negotiating new roles or were new to the university setting and supported them in their ability to negotiate the complexity of academia.

Benefits of mentoring: informal support from a colleague who was not their line manager

Informal and confidential (i.e., not shared with their line manager) support from their mentor was important to the ECAs. The role of the mentor was often seen as an addition or different to that support they received from their line manager. Participant 18 explained some of the differences from her perspective:

It should be a continuous process [mentoring]. It shouldn't just be the part of the role of the line manager. Because that is very limiting. It's often the case that the mentor might not be as experienced as the person's line manager. So, it's an interesting reversal ... it's an opportunity for them [mentees] to discuss their needs, support and development needs.

Supporting line managers and making sure that they are well aware of how they can kind of be more mentors, more as mentors and less managers. [Participant 18, Female, Faculty 4, interview]

While this particular benefit of having additional support from their line manager seemed prominent to the ECAs, other benefits included reflection, the ability to talk through and develop ideas, a feeling of empowerment, and developing resilience. For example, an ECA talked about how their mentor had helped them to develop assertiveness:

Assertiveness as a skill is something that has been [enhanced] because... it was commented [on] by my mentor that I wasn't assertive enough, I felt I was scared. Now at times I was, I felt like I was out of my depth or scared, I was out of my depth. And, and we [my mentor and I] worked on how I could increase my confidence, I suppose or be more assertive. (Participant 35, Female, Faculty 4, interview)

The benefits of mentoring were therefore centred on the notion of additional support, developing skills, and having a safe space to test and develop ideas. This resulted in the ECAs feeling comfortable in their new roles and experiences of academia:

Really useful relationship and was safe, and it allowed you to just blow or do whatever you had to do. (Participant 51, Female, Faculty 4, interview)

It helps them [your mentor] understand what you can do or what you can't do, what you're good or you can be good at. It can help you understand what you may not be comfortable with. And that's also useful from a career or professional level. (Participant 18, Female, Faculty 4, interview)

The mentor subsequently provided additional support for ECAs that was comforting and empowering, and important to be viewed as additional to the formalised support of their line manager.

Relationship building

Mentoring was viewed by the ECAs as a process whereby a relationship needed to be established and then built upon over time. This was seen as a shared responsibility between the mentee and the mentor. Participant 18 explained this in her interview: "Seeing a kind of mentoring moment as an opportunity to develop a friendship, a collegial friendship" (Participant 18, Female, Faculty 4, interview).

Therefore, at times, building a relationship between the mentor and the mentee was seen as a means of developing a collegial or critical friendship with other colleagues. This was

seen as important to develop from the outset by Participant 23: “setting up a starting point of the relationship to make sure that there’s a clear understanding as to what’s expected out of that relationship” (Participant 23, Female, Faculty 1, interview).

This was expanded upon by Participant 35 in terms of the mutual development important in terms of developing a sense of comfort: “If you define a relationship, I think it’s helpful and to feel comfortable in that and what to expect from one another” (Participant 35, Female, Faculty 4, interview).

While relationship building was viewed as important from the outset, it is important to note that there was not necessarily an end point to this relationship crafting, and so mentoring was viewed as much more of a developing process than an end point. This was nicely summarised in the interview with one of the ECAs: “Whatever the definition of mentoring is, it felt like mentoring at the start but then became something different as we started to develop our relationship” (Participant 51, Female, Faculty 4, interview).

Subsequently, for ECAs, mentoring was not only a valuable relationship to build at the start of their academic careers, but also a supportive relationship that they would develop into the future.

Discussion

In this study, we used a mixed-methods approach to explore academic mentoring from the perspectives of ECAs. Taking our research questions into account, we discuss these three areas regarding opportunities for mentoring (RQ1), factors that support and hinder mentoring (RQ2), and the perceived value of mentoring for ECAs (RQ3).

From the quantitative results, we can see that there were no significant differences in terms of the availability of mentoring opportunities between ECAs and non-ECAs (RQ1). This is encouraging given the literature by Sutherland-Smith *et al.* (2011) who suggested that mentoring is not always easy to access for ECAs. Yet from the survey results, we can see that

while there is no difference in terms of perceived opportunities for mentoring, it would seem that the ability for those opportunities to be visible and feeling that there is time to undertake them differs depending on career stage. This would seem to align with the findings reported by Sutherland-Smith *et al.* (2011) in terms of more senior colleagues being mostly positive about the systematic provision of mentorship for ECAs but not necessarily for themselves. This finding would seem to align with the more common perception and social identity of more senior and experienced academics as mentors and more junior colleagues being viewed as mentees or recipients of mentorship. We feel that this finding corroborates but also extends the recent work of Etzkorn and Braddock (2020) who reported similar findings within the US context in terms of ECAs. They perceived the value of mentorship but experienced differences between junior and senior faculty members regarding their views and participation in the mentoring process. Subsequently, it seems further research needs to be done in relation to sustaining the mentoring process throughout person's academic career.

The ECAs in this study found factors that supported mentorship (RQ2) were attributes such as the ability to build relationships, approachability, empathy, and accessibility in terms of their mentor's time. Indeed, this last finding is supported by Ehrich *et al.* (2004) in relation to the lack of time to meet with a mentor being problematic. Given the reports in the literature regarding mental health concerns of ECAs, it is encouraging to see that mentors having empathy was one of the key areas that supported mentoring from the perspectives of both ECAs and non-ECAs. Those factors that were viewed to hinder mentorship (RQ2) were seen as relevant fit of the mentor to the mentee and having time in their workload to give to the mentoring experience. Mentoring, in this regard, can be seen as just another part of person's identity as an academic, yet recognition of the time given to the role would be welcomed. Having greater recognition of the time given to mentoring would seem to support ECAs in developing their academic and social identity. Indeed, the literature is supportive in stating that

mentorship plays an important part in developing person's identity (c.f., Atkins *et al.*, 2020; Pozzi *et al.*, 2020), and so addressing these aspects that hinder the mentoring relationship is likely to improve the experiences of ECAs in higher education.

From the ECA's perspective, the value of mentoring (RQ3) was served as a supportive structure for helping them to make sense of "being an academic" (Daniel, 2018; Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021; Rienties and Hosein, 2020). This social identity of "an academic" seemed to have emotional significance for the ECAs, which provides further evidence to that reported by Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) in relation to mentoring helping ECAs make sense of their new worlds and identities. Yet, as reported by Walters *et al.* (2020), mentoring can help support a sense of teaching identity. Our findings provide a perspective in terms of a broader social identity that would seem to encompass more than just teaching but also the broader aspects of ECAs' identity such as research, role development, and norms.

We would also argue that relationship building between both the mentee and the mentor is also a means of developing a collegial and critical friendship with other colleagues. This is an example of what Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) described as a form of alternative mentorship. Indeed, one of our key findings was that mentorship support was viewed by ECAs as mentorship that was separate and additional to what they received from their formal line manager. Having line management support and a quality relationship between employees and line management is important to develop work climates, but if this relationship breaks down or is not supportive, then the mentor would seem to provide an important source of support for ECAs that is both valued and necessary.

Implications for practice

Our findings point to practical implications in terms of building organisational approaches to mentoring. Given the perceived differences in visibility and perceived access of mentoring highlighted in this paper, we recommend that providing a guiding framework could be a

starting point. This is supported by research conducted in the same study context by Fayram *et al.* (2018) who argued for the importance of training to develop effective communication strategies between mentors and mentees. This may develop a way to counter the feeling of addressing the support given by line managers in conjunction with mentoring. Academic institutions tend not to enforce or control an active mentorship programme and, very often, receiving good mentorship is something left to chance. A visible academic monitoring programme on mentorship should be established for students and ECAs to ensure equity, choice, and support. This is something that could be incorporated into an induction or probation programme. In addition, using professional development training to help develop and sustain the relationships between the mentee and the mentor would seem important to pursue. This could work alongside a development of a reward or accreditation programme to encourage colleagues to undertake mentoring. At an individual level, it would be wise for academics to seek out opportunities for mentorship and, in time, feeding back into the mentoring process by becoming a mentor would benefit the collegiate process of mentoring. This would support the development of an academic identity, which as we have demonstrated is important for ECAs.

Limitations and conclusion

In this study, we took a mixed-methods approach to exploring ECAs' experiences of academic mentoring. The main contributions of this article are that we have demonstrated that mentoring supports ECAs to make sense of "being an academic" and thus their identity, even in online and distance contexts. Furthermore, our analysis argued that visibility and access to mentoring differ, depending on career stage and the prominence of mentoring for person's social identity. One of the limitations of this study includes the relatively small sample size of ECAs relative to the wider academic population and possible self-selection of particular groups of ECAs to partake in this research. However, given the relatively good response rates and good take-up of interviews with ECAs in phase 2, some of these concerns are mitigated. Future research

could therefore include a larger sample size and explorations in different contexts to compare the findings. Similarly, studying the impact of mentoring of ECAs' overtime would aid universities in supporting future programmes and providing an evidence base to their development.

Given the value that ECAs hold for mentoring in terms of aiding them to make sense of their roles in academia and providing additional support that is not line management, it would seem important that the value and time involved in the mentoring relationship be recognised to ensure its continuity. Indeed, if mentoring is not viewed as a valued part of the role and identity of a senior colleague, then there will be a shortage of mentors to support ECAs. Similarly, if mentoring is not available, then ECAs are likely to lose a vital line of their career development and risk feeling unsupported or leaving academia altogether. "Mentorship was born in academia and this is where it belongs" (Marino, 2021, p.4), so supporting ECAs in receiving a supportive, valued, and sustainable mentorship experience in academia will enable this experience to continue.

Statement of interest

No conflict of interests were reported by the authors.

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