

Exploring Early-Career Academics' Experiences with Mentoring at a Higher Education Institution in Jamaica

Therese Ferguson, Ann-Marie Wilmot

The University of the West Indies, Mona

Abstract

Early-career academic staff have various professional and psychosocial needs as they enter the world of academia. Mentors can provide guidance concerning departmental and university regulations and protocols, career development, balancing the professional and personal spheres of life and more. Yet, many faculties and departments within tertiary institutions do not have active formal mentorship programmes to support early-career academics. This generic qualitative study aimed to explore early-career academics' experiences with and perceptions of mentorship within a faculty at a regional tertiary-level institution. Data for this study were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews and thematically analysed. Among the main findings are that early-career academics desire mentorship, which is not readily available within their departments. However, some unstructured forms exist, and they suggest structured systems of mentorship for the institution. Recommendations include having deans and department heads provide training to identify and address the career-specific needs of faculty they supervise.

Keywords: early-career, academics, mentorship, higher education, Caribbean

Introduction

In academia, the term "early-career" is usually defined as research capability in the first five years after PhD completion, with career progression from post-doctoral employment to tenure promotion and after (Bosanquet et al., 2017). Austin (2010) broadens the perspective gained from Bosanquet et al. (2017), claiming that early-career faculty are in the service period between years 1–7 of their faculty employment or those who have not yet gained tenure. They also extend this designation to faculty who have previously worked in other sectors but have transitioned to higher education. Part of the experience of early-career academics is that they face a host of challenges as they negotiate the

very demanding academic landscape. Trower's (2010) assertion that there is a culture of normalising unlimited demands on faculty, thus necessitating avenues for reciprocal support and assistance with time management and energy, among others, rationalizes their status. This normalizing of unlimited demand on faculty that Trower (2010) advances is ironic considering The European Commission's (2011) report that access to resources, supportive interactions, and transparent career prospects are challenging for early-career researchers in academia worldwide. Both sources expose the inequity in work demand on early-career academics and the dearth of available resources with which to respond.

Mentoring seems a plausible remedial tool to address some of the named challenges because of the reasons argued below.

Mentoring is promoted as a crucial mechanism of support, especially for those in academia whose careers are at the earlier stages (Sargent & Rienties, 2022). Zeind et al. (2005) underscore this cruciality by arguing that the contribution that mentorship makes as a support mechanism for developing and retaining faculty is highly reputed. Other scholars also tout this view regarding the potent value of mentorship. For instance, Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) have used this developmental practice as a means of managing the talents of their inexperienced or freshly appointed faculty, as part of their succession planning apparatus and to facilitate the transference of skills and knowledge needed to effectively function (Roets et al., 2019). Thus, mentorship cements itself as what Zeind et al. (2005) describe as a chief element of academic environments. In light of the stance that faculty generally feel a sense of disconnection and disengagement from their departments (Beech et al., 2013), the availability of this support continues to remain critical for early-career academics.

Nonetheless, there is a challenge. Despite the value of mentorship, the increasingly competitive nature of higher education means that academics' time is often more devoted to their professional demands as opposed to the career development of others through, for instance, mentorship (Roofe & Miller, 2015). Indeed, there are increasing calls for mentorship to be officially recognised, to ensure that advanced career scholars are willing to make themselves available to mentor junior colleagues (Sargent & Rienties, 2022). Roofe and Miller (2015) and Sargent and Rienties (2022) reinforce the currency of the need for scholars to further explore mentorship as a strategy for early-career empowerment by ensuring that the experiences they encounter are developmental and prepare them to thrive. Remmik et al. (2011) contend that experiences during the initial years of academic careers have a great influence on the development of university lecturers' concepts of learning and teaching, their values, and their professional identities as university scholars.

This eradicates any doubt that for universities to thrive, they must have a workforce that can deliver on their objectives for teaching, research, public service, and other priorities.

The foregoing discussion supports Straus et al.'s (2013) view that effective mentorship is imperative for the career success and satisfaction of both mentors and mentees, but myriad challenges prevent faculty members from accessing the effective mentorship they need. The Caribbean landscape, including Jamaica, has not been cauterized from this reality; which leaves much work to be done through contextual exploration of mentorship experiences from varied perspectives. This qualitative research was a response to address this gap. It was aimed at understanding early-career experiences with mentorship at a local university to gain insights into their experiences as they navigated the terrain of mentorship, and their recommendations for improving it.

This study is therefore significant, as it focused on the experiences of early-career academic staff in an underexplored area in the Caribbean. The body of existing work, such as that of Ferguson and Ellis (2022), addressed mentorship of Masters' level students; whilst work such as Roofe and Miller (2015) focused on the mentor-mentee relationship between the two authors. The work of Gill and Gosine-Boodoo (2021) studied librarians, but it used a survey research design. This study contrasts with Gill and Gosine-Boodoo (2021) by employing a qualitative approach to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences. Additionally, it adds to this growing body of work by focusing on early-career academic faculty experiences at a regional Caribbean university. Hence, it offers insights into practical and policy measures that can be incorporated into regional HEIs to support the career trajectory of these individuals and opens other areas for research exploration. Additionally, the study provides a springboard from which further research exploration can be pursued to deepen the dialogue about how to best address early-career faculty in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. The importance of this dialogue is justifiable in the context of what has already been shared. If early-career faculty members

fail to master their work demands (especially in research, teaching, and collaborative efforts), their career trajectory will be eclipsed by the resultant psychological strain and will retard their growth. This would not auger well, as universities must respond to national developmental needs, and to operate from such a state of deficit would negate this goal. The applicability to Jamaican universities, particularly the one under study, is great, given the institution's need to enhance its global competitiveness through high-quality, relevant research.

This research was guided by two central research questions and their commensurate interview questions to understand early-career faculty experiences and perceptions of mentoring and their recommendations to improve mentorship.

Central Research Questions:

1. What are early-career academic staff's experiences with and perceptions of mentoring?
2. What recommendations do early-career academic staff have for improving the mentorship process?

In this paper, we therefore began by establishing the overall struggle of early-career academics and the justification of mentorship as an appropriate tool to address some of their challenges. What follows is a brief overview of mentorship, early-career faculty needs and the scholarly discourse on mentorship in Jamaica and the Caribbean. Thereafter, we provide a description of our methodological processes and present the research findings, themed under the main research questions. The article closes by presenting some practical implications for policy, practice, and further research work.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, we turn to Yob and Crawford's (2012) Mentoring Model, developed from their synthesis of the literature on mentoring students. Whilst their framework was developed with respect to doctoral students, we felt this an appropriate framework, given that the literature

speaks to both sets of elements (academic and psychosocial) in this framework. The academic domain, as outlined by Yob and Crawford, consists of four attributes that mentors should have:

- Competence — which includes individuals' expertise in their field, knowledge of research methods, and familiarity with the norms of their institution;
- Availability — immediacy in professional and social contexts, accessibility, and responsiveness;
- Induction into the academic environment through, for instance, facilitating opportunities for networking, collaborative research and publications; and
- Challenge — to facilitate the mentees' growth through constructive criticism and professional and academic questioning.

In addition to the academic domain, Yob and Crawford also outlined three attributes underlying the psychosocial domain that a mentor should possess:

- personal qualities — such as trust, friendliness, and patience;
- communication skills — such as the ability to engage in active listening and to speak the truth to mentees; and
- emotional support — offering the mentee encouragement and affirmation.

Yob and Crawford's (2012) framework is useful as it speaks to the qualities and needs that underpin a successful mentoring relationship, support the mentees' successful orientation into academia, and promote development as an academic.

Literature Review

The Origins and Role of Mentorship

Mentorship has been a longstanding critical aspect of higher education, given the pivotal role that it plays in the holistic development and growth of tertiary students (Paterson & Hutchinson, 2019), a pool from which HEIs typically recruit

full-time and adjunct faculty members. Newman (2022) adds to this discourse about the role of mentorship by placing emphasis on the value of the mentorship process to the mentee. Similarly, given the importance of research and publications to faculty in HEIs (Gill & Gosine-Boodoo, 2021), mentorship has an essential role to play in how early-career faculty members grow and develop within their positions.

The concept of mentoring originates in Greek mythology with Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, entrusting his colleague Mentor with his son Telemachus for guidance and counselling (Büchner & Hay, 1998; Cohall, 2021). Mentor “plays a protective role in the safe and proper development of the young charge’s potential” (Büchner & Hay, 1998, p. 19). Thus lie the origins of mentoring as a process to guide newcomers into their profession (Büchner & Hay, 1998). Mentoring has been defined as a “process in which a person with a rank of seniority, the mentor, guides the development of a junior colleague, the mentee” (Cohall, 2021, p. 66). A similar definition proposes mentoring as “a form of academic socialisation that mediates the professional learning of new faculty, facilitating their entry ... and thus equipping them to adapt effectively both personally and culturally” (Mullen & Forbes, 2000, p. 43). In these and other definitions, it is seen as a process that benefits the mentee primarily. Indeed, as Büchner and Hay (1998) propose, it is most often thought of in this way.

Mentoring has been characterized as formal or informal, with differences in how the relationships are initiated, how long they last, and the ways in which they are governed (Newman, 2022). Numerous definitions of mentorship abound in the literature, with its traditional conceptualisation as one that has been hierarchical and unidirectional (Dickson et al., 2021) in nature, with unequal power relations between the mentor and mentee, primarily benefitting mentees. Despite these merits, Bottoms et al. (2013) critiqued this model as one that could potentially stifle the autonomy of scholarship production, which is central to academic work. However, as the concept has evolved, more contemporary conceptualisations

view mentorship as a process that can also include non-hierarchical structures. For instance, peer mentorship is not focused upon as much in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean in the literature, even though peer mentors report more feelings of “mutual expertise, equality and empathy frequently absent from the aforementioned” traditional mentorship relationships (Büchner & Hay, 1998, p. 22). Indeed, the findings of other researchers also highlight the critical value that peer mentors have for early-career scholars (Mullen & Forbes, 2000). For instance, from their case study of a 6-year mentorship program, Dickson et al. (2021) reported several benefits early-career faculty members derived from their peer-mentorship group. These included targeted professional learning experiences, highlighting each other’s work through nominations for rewards and positions of leadership in professional bodies. Nonetheless, this should not undermine the fact that there is also research that speaks to the mutual or reciprocal benefits of mentoring for both mentors and mentees (see Ferguson & Ellis, 2022).

The literature also underscores the various roles that mentors play, including that of teacher, confidante, counsellor, supporter, coach, sponsor, collaborator, and role model (Bäker et al., 2018; Büchner & Hay, 1998). The benefits of mentorship for the mentee include, but are not limited to, the development of a professional academic identity; learning new skills; learning the institutional norms, processes, expectations and responsibilities of the new work environment; increased scholarly productivity; integration into professional networks; sharing of scholarly opportunities; and emotional support (Anekstein, 2021; Bäker et al., 2018; Ferguson & Ellis, 2022; Mazerolle et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). Thus, mentorship has both academic and psychosocial functions.

Early-Career Faculty Needs

On the academic faculty journey, one certainty about mentoring relationships captured by Mgaiwa and Kapinga (2021) is that beginning and more experienced academics encounter various impediments. This demands close attention to

the elements that frame successful relationships and those that occasion failure, considering the support that early-career faculty need. Straus et al. (2013) advocate for relationships framed by reciprocal influence, mutuality of respect, transparent expectations, similar values, and personal associations to ensure successful mentoring relationships. In contrast, they claim that where communication is weak, attitude is non-committal, a clash of personalities and interests exists, real or imagined competitiveness is discerned, and the mentor is inexperienced, mentorship will collapse. Therefore, to mitigate failed early-career mentor relationships, what they need to progress in their career must be understood.

Sims' (2002) two general categories of mentoring — career functions and psychological functions — provide the lens under which these challenges may be examined. According to him, career functions aid career growth and expose mentees to situations which make them more visible and provide challenges, exposure, and protection, among other functions. On the other hand, the psychological functions of mentoring help the mentee's sense of personal and professional efficacy, and provide validation and camaraderie. Faith as an engine of agency and resilience; the ability to identify independent interests and focus; and the input of formal and informal mentorship structures were identified as important psychosocial factors of the early-career journey in an African context (Kay & Karmowska, 2024). While advancing that early-career academics found value for their career advancement and workplace safety in their mentorship experiences with senior academics and peers when it was supportive, Gatwiri et al. (2024) also noted that early-career members of staff were often concerned about their experiences with lack of mentoring and betrayal by their peers or senior others. This further highlights the salience of psychological and psychosocial support structures in mentorship relationships.

Though the academic arena has experienced extensive changes over the past few decades for early-career researchers in relation to overall well-being and employment-related matters

(Johnson & Weivoda, 2021), some challenges persist, including in the Caribbean. Related to career functions, some areas in which early-career academics manifest gaps are: inadequacies and uncertainties in undertaking research, securing grants, student advising, and committee service (Popper, 2007, as cited in Houston, 2019). Zimmerman (2021) supports student advising but expands the needs by adding the ability to cope with institutional change and learning to teach in the context of higher education. Additionally, early-career faculty have suffered from burnout (Iris, 2023) and worry about their career progression, given the likely obstacles to becoming tenured (Austin, 2010). They also wrestle with instability in their jobs, insufficient funds for research, and participating in high-quality opportunities for training (Shetima et al., 2024).

Early-career faculty also have needs associated with their psychological functions. The absence of encouragement, lack of mentoring, and insufficient time to engage in other work — apart from teaching (Hemmings et al., 2013) — are among their struggles. Essentially, they need consistent encouragement, mentoring, and more time to be productive. Theirs is also the struggle to unpack what is normative or traditional within their departments, as well as the various cultures that exist (Sargent & Rienties, 2022). Yet, these are not all. Austin (2010), in naming the lack of collegiality and community and the need to achieve the right work-life balance as challenges that early-career faculty face, alerts readers to the need for a more collegial atmosphere and stable work cultures in which they can flourish. Hence, this amplifies the need for effective mentoring and the importance of including their perspectives when analysing their needs and crafting relevant and applicable solutions to address their concerns. Another important consideration is the recognition that mentorship is not an act to be done to early-career scholars, but rather a process in which to involve them. Newman (2022) validates this way of constructing mentorship by highlighting various characteristics that impact the success of mentor-mentee relationships, including personality types, reciprocity, and shared interests.

Mentorship in Jamaica and the Caribbean

In the Caribbean region, Newman (2022) points out that mentorship at the graduate student level is a “hybrid of the U.S. and United Kingdom model”, where “supervisors generally provide guidance in the form of monitoring their students’ academic progress, while providing instruction and encouragement in their research activities; more so than mentoring on personal and career development” (Newman, 2022, p. 199). He does note, though, that this supervisory relationship may evolve into a mentoring relationship.

Within Jamaica and the wider Caribbean, the literature base on mentorship is slowly growing, though it is not as substantive as it could be. Some researchers have been engaging with the notion of mentorship at various levels, including for undergraduates, postgraduates and faculty. Paterson and Hutchinson (2019) used a quantitative research approach to explore mentorship outcomes for Bachelors’ level degree students at a university in the Caribbean. Amongst their findings was that student affairs staff had a significant impact on mentoring outcomes, as opposed to other types of mentors. Ferguson and Ellis (2022) study used a qualitative approach to explore mentors’ and mentees’ experiences with respect to graduate research student development at a university in the Caribbean, with a specific focus on Masters’ level education students. Their study found that mentoring relationships enhanced students’ research capabilities, found students more readily identifying themselves as researchers, and facilitated the translation of graduate students’ research skills into their professional contexts in the education sector. Newman (2022) undertook a qualitative study to explore the mentoring experiences of both mentors and graduate student mentees at a university in the Caribbean, finding that both sets of participants described the relationship as a fulfilling one, despite some of the challenges encountered.

Research on mentorship at the faculty level has also been undertaken. Roofe and Miller’s (2015) qualitative case study of two academics in Jamaica, documented and discussed how

the mentorship relationship facilitated the development of the junior academic through factors such as goal setting, the enhancement of confidence, and the provision of opportunities for career development. Gill and Gosine-Boodoo (2021) used survey research to explore the mentorship experiences of academic librarians at a regional university campus in Trinidad. Amongst the findings were that whilst individuals received support from mentors, they were not confident that the support had any impact.

Although these studies are important and have added to the body of literature, the research literature on mentoring in the Caribbean region needs much more development (Newman, 2022). In particular, Newman (2022) points out that “the exploration of mentoring relationships can provide an understanding of how they can assist faculty, administrators, and students to highlight the nuances of cultural and institutionally specific experiences” (p. 222). Further, given Cohall’s (2021) call for mentorship as a key element of maintaining high quality teaching, training, and research within the regional university – The University of the West Indies – this proposed study becomes significant. Cohall (2021) proposes that “formal mentoring can build resilience of Caribbean academic institutions [in a] challenging environment of higher education [and that] building capacity through mentorship in higher education strengthens the research output and contributes to the development of the region” (p. 67).

The scope of this literature review on early-career mentorship research in higher education acknowledges both traditional (Büchner & Hay, 1998) and contemporary (Dickson et al., 2021; Mullen & Forbes, 2000) mentoring approaches; a variety of early-career needs (Iris, 2023; Zimmerman, 2021) and the means by which they may be addressed (Austin, 2010; Hemmings et al., 2013); as well as the career functions of mentorship (Sims, 2002; Dickson et al., 2021). The mentorship research discussed in this review, specific to the Caribbean, also examined mentorship practices at the undergraduate, graduate, and faculty levels in higher education, with one study remaining ambiguous regarding

its impact on mentees. Consequently, there is a vibrant, growing body of literature concerning mentorship in the Caribbean. However, in light of Newman's (2022) characterisation of Caribbean mentorship practices as a hybrid model, there are gaps in the understanding of mentorship relations. To begin with, focused research on early-career faculty experiences in the Jamaican and wider Caribbean contexts is still limited and there is a lack of sufficient knowledge to develop an indigenous model that reflects Caribbean experiences. Both understandings are vital, as mentorship efforts align with institutional capacity-building, research productivity, and collaborative opportunities at the university level, which could potentially have a broader impact. This suggests that mentorship should be regarded as a sustainable development endeavour, reliant on succession planning to ensure that mentors are adequately prepared (Straus et al., 2013) to impart the skills and knowledge necessary for the academy's survival. This research exploration of early-career faculty experiences can provide valuable insights that contribute to any framework, guiding more intentional discussions about how early-career faculty mentorship needs are addressed.

Methodology

Study Design and Participants

The study employed a qualitative research approach in order to allow us to hear directly from the research participants about their unique experiences with, and perceptions of, mentorship and its various facets. Additionally, the use of qualitative research allowed the researchers to access deep descriptions and understandings (Lichtman, 2013) of early-career faculty experiences with mentoring. Merriam (2009) highlights that, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). Specifically, a generic research design was used, as this study "exhibit[s] some or all of the characteristics of

qualitative endeavour" but is not explicitly guided by a particular qualitative research genre (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 2; Kahlke, 2014). Additionally, as Caelli et al. (2003) assert, the generic research design is apt for those whose focus is on understanding an experience or event. In this instance, we were focused on understanding early-career academics' experiences, specific to mentorship. This deep, detailed understanding is critical to ensuring that mechanisms are in place to respond to and support the needs of these early-career academics in ways that serve their interests and, by extension, further universities' agendas in research and publications.

The study focused on six early-career academic staff members within a particular faculty at a regional HEI in Jamaica. This was deemed adequate, given that the nature of qualitative research accommodates small sample sizes (with sometimes as few as one person), allowing for in-depth detailed data to be gathered (Lichtman, 2013) on participants' experiences of mentorship. These were individuals drawn from five of the faculty's departments who had obtained their doctoral degree, as we felt that those with a doctoral degree were on a research track within the university, which includes a focus on research and publications. To ensure inclusion, we advised the Dean of the faculty about the research. The Dean advised that we approach heads of departments to identify possible participants who fit our study criteria; in keeping with Bosanquet et al.'s (2017) thoughts that early-career in academic circles typically spans five years after PhD completion, with a focus on career progression for postdoctoral appointment and beyond. Additionally, purposive sampling was also used to some extent, as the first researcher occupied an administrative role at the time of the study and thus knew a number of early-career staff at its inception. Participants who did not fall into the category of early-career academic faculty members, as well as those without a PhD, were excluded from the study in order to set its parameters (see Table 1). Four faculty members were female and two male. All had obtained their PhD within the last six years at the time of this research.

Table 1*Research Participants*

Participant	Gender	Year PhD Awarded
Daisy	Female	2020
Basil	Male	2018
Acia	Female	2021
Lily	Female	2021
Olive	Female	2018
Briar	Male	2022

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected through the use of interviews, as the technique allows researchers to hear from participants in their own words. Specifically, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were used, as these offer the researcher and the participants flexibility in the research process. As there was a rise in COVID-19 cases in Jamaica at the time of the study, to ensure that neither the participants nor the researchers were put at risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus, interviews were conducted virtually, via Zoom video conferencing. The interview questions focused on how participants defined a mentor/mentoring; their involvement in mentoring since joining the faculty; successes or challenges experienced; strategies used by their mentor(s); how mentorship has shaped them as early-career faculty; and recommendations for improving the mentorship process. Additionally, we sought to gather basic demographic data about the participants. We felt these questions focused on their experiences of mentoring, and recommendations with respect to developing a culture of mentorship within the faculty and the wider university.

Data Analysis

To facilitate data analysis, all one-to-one semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were read through several times to become familiar with the data and to locate identifying markers for removal in order to safeguard anonymity and confidentiality. Transcripts were coded, with words or phrases that described the meaning of

the segments of text assigned (Creswell, 2012). Open-coding techniques were used for broad meaning-making. Subsequently, similar codes were clustered. This categorization process led to the emergence of common themes through axial coding. In terms of trustworthiness, several measures were taken. The data were first triangulated among three individuals (the two researchers plus a research assistant) who reviewed codes, clusters, and the assertions being proposed to identify similar ideas that emerged, and locate discrepant information and possible omissions. Member checking was then conducted — transcripts and preliminary findings were shared with participants to ensure accurate representations of their data and alignment of the findings with participants' experiences. Finally, findings were shared using rich, thick description, enabling readers to assess their transferability. In keeping with the generic research design, these findings took on a narrative feel in some instances, allowing for the exhibiting of features of other research designs (e.g., narrative) even whilst not claiming to be a particular research design (Caelli et al., 2003).

Ethical Considerations

The research proposal was submitted to and approved by the university's institutional review board. Additionally, permission to undertake the research study was sought from the Dean of the Faculty from which the participants were drawn. Participants who fit the inclusion criteria for the study were introduced to the research and invited

to participate. The informed consent forms were shared with the potential participants, outlining further particulars of the research. In addition, each participant was pre-assigned a pseudonym for use during the data collection, data analysis and reporting processes. In reporting the findings, these pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

Positionality Statement

Before we go further, we think it would be useful to offer some details about ourselves and what piqued our interest in this study. The first author has offered support to early-career researchers at the doctoral level throughout her career to-date in academia, through (i) the delivery of workshops and courses focused on research, writing, and publication skills, and (ii) the inclusion and mentorship of graduate students in research and publication projects for which she is principal or co-principal investigator. She does this as a way of helping young researchers navigate their entry into academia, particularly as she benefited from three critical mentorship relationships at pivotal junctures when she was an early-career researcher.

The second author led a department at a tertiary institution where oversight of new recruits was part of her portfolio. She displayed commitment to helping them adjust to their roles and functions in ways that would maximise the department's output and experienced how impactful those efforts were on their adjustment. Recently, the roles have reversed. She transitioned to a university, where, despite having nearly 30 years of teaching experience, of which 15 years were spent training teachers, she was faced with navigating an entirely new set of work demands at that level. While her previous work experiences and a few supportive colleagues aided her pathway as an early-career university faculty member, the transition proved challenging due to the general perception that one should inherently know how to navigate the role. This sparked her curiosity to deeply understand two aspects: how other early-career individuals navigated the environment and the

institutional support structures that were in place to facilitate a smoother transition. Understanding these factors can shed light on how to assist her, even while she continues to navigate this landscape. Thus, both researchers' experiences converge at the point of a shared desire to seek further knowledge to enrich our independent relationships with the respective early-career members with whom we continue to interact. In this light, we remained alert throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the need to sublimate any possible bias our closeness to the subject could invoke.

Findings

In this section, we now turn to present the findings of our research. The main research questions form the broad headings or thematic focuses, and the assertions derived from each are the subthemes.

Research Question 1: What are early-career academic staff's experiences with mentoring?

Assertion 1: Early career academic staff describe varied experiences with mentorship since joining the faculty.

In general, participants shared positive experiences since joining the faculty. They expressed finding mutuality amongst colleagues, rich and meaningful interactions with students, and opportunities to develop professionally. Basil shared: "I can say, one, that I have found the teaching very fulfilling ... and then to have colleagues as well who are much more specifically interested in some of the work that I do as well". Lily indicated:

So I guess in a nutshell, I would say very good ... I like the opportunities for growth and I like the interaction with my students. That's the best part of the job. The interaction with students is rich. I feel like they learn from me and I learn from them ... so I like that. But in addition, you know, the university allows opportunities to grow.

Thus, though Basil and Lily outlined the positive aspects of their roles, Basil's was anchored in his interactions with students and colleagues'

interest in his work while Lily presented a contrast, highlighting more satisfaction from the reciprocal learning interactions with students.

In terms of mentorship, these experiences were more mixed in nature. Participants cited some elements of support, for instance, with respect to research and publications. However, they found some aspects of the onboarding process to be minimal in nature. With respect to her Department, Daisy shared,

Previously, I don't think that structure and support existed. So, um, I think there has been a deliberate move to create an environment where academics ... in terms of research output, which is priority ... there is a mechanism in place that is trying to get us to complete more research.

Briar concurred with Daisy's reported initial lack of onboarding and the frustration it occasioned when he outlined:

Well, in my mind, I've gotten aspects of the support I need ... initially when I joined ... I got frustrated and it was more on the administrative side ... and I don't think that the onboarding process was one that accommodated somebody who is new to the process.

Thus, participants highlighted fulfilling experiences with respect to their new work in general but more varied experiences in terms of the support received, noting that at the start of their journeys, where support was non-existent or minimal, it improved as they moved on.

Assertion 2: Participants have had to seek mentorship from plural means to address either human or material needs in seeking to advance their careers.

In instances where there was a lack of formal and/or informal mentorship structures or where participants felt more support was needed, participants drew on various means of support. This included accessing expertise from persons within and external to their departments. Olive, for instance, described how she drew on a few key persons for mentoring support, including some from outside of her own department.

But for my career, I have more than one mentor. I have more than one. Um, but I have a main one ... the thing is, you

have to look where you want to go in your career. The person who is the main one may lack certain, um, dimensions ... So, therefore, I have to also have another person who can help me in the area of projects and publications because the main person is not really ... whereas the person is an academic, they're not really entrenched in that culture of um, research and projects and doing extracurricular stuff. I do have like probably about two or three more persons who I'm constantly in touch with them on a regular basis getting that kind of support that I need ... one is connected [to the faculty]. One is retired. She's directly in my specialization ... um, from our faculty. And the other one, she is in another department that is connected to my field.

This was similar to what Daisy expressed as she highlighted the need to draw on diverse expertise given the newness to the field and the lack of explicit guidance in some instances:

So I would say at the moment I have two mentors: one in the department and someone who is external ... there are so many areas as a new academic, someone who is new to the field, that you were never exposed to or taught or wasn't explained to you explicitly ... this is how we operate, this is what is expected and so on ... Yeah, the local [mentor] ... So personality-wise, okay, I'd say that we're opposite...worked in academia for over 20 years.... We study adjacent issues. So they understand all the theories and questions I'm asking.

Briar also shared a similar perspective to that of Daisy and expounded: "in fact I consulted and got guidance from outside because I was asking inside and I never got any help." Thus, these individuals were drawing on various persons with the relevant expertise to offer them guidance, even when those persons could not be found within their departments. They found this integral to ensure that they could understand and meet the demands and expectations of them in their new environments.

Assertion 3: The majority of participants believe mentors have shaped their career paths and it is vital that mentors are interested in their growth and professional advancement.

The participants in this research were of the belief that those acting as their mentors

had shaped their academic career paths. Acia outlined how mentorship helped her and also helped graduate students and other early-career faculty:

There were groups of graduate students and, you know, early career professionals and we would discuss the ways to publish our articles and how to craft manuscripts and to create, you know, other connections with other professionals in different universities. So that was one experience.

Thus, this helped to contribute to her research publication work as well as broaden her professional network, particularly in terms of those working at other institutions. With respect to the mentor who offered her opportunities in teaching, Lily emphatically stated "They have contributed tremendously to that. So I feel confident when I stand in front of my class". Lily could therefore more confidently deliver her material and interact with her students. Additionally, Basil said,

I mean ... having to plan ahead for my career and where do I want to be in the future ... I think mentorship has definitely shaped that ... what I need to prioritize is learning the ins and outs of the evaluation and promotion process here ... I think mentorship has really helped me.

Thus, for these early-career academic staff, mentors helped in several of their academic responsibilities, including teaching and orientation to departmental and university norms and expectations.

Assertion 4: Participants experience mentorship as a reciprocal act between mentor and mentee, and one that fosters continuity.

Similar to the literature, these participants saw themselves gaining from their mentor whilst also giving to their mentor. Basil shared that "there's more opportunity to influence the mentor, I suppose, and mentor them. I'm not saying that from pride ... or, you know, cocky ... you know, as I said, there's room for the relationship to flow in different directions." Briar, in speaking of his relationship with his mentor and their collaborative activities, indicated that "we've collaborated in that way. So what it says

is that I'm sharing aspects of my experience with her and she's also sharing aspects of her experience with me ... So the technical term is a reverse mentoring approach". Thus, Briar felt that he was able to offer to the mentoring relationship even as he was benefitting from it.

Additionally, they felt that this process of contributing to someone's growth should be a continual one, where those who have benefited from mentorship give back. They therefore felt that it was incumbent upon them to "pay it forward" with students and/or peers. Acia described it thus:

You know, you have received that help and that guidance and that kind of positive reinforcement and it's good that you can pass that on, which I typically do, you know, whenever I'm in a session with my students ... and you know I would provide them with that necessary information and that support. So having that foundation first makes it easier for me to pass that tradition on as well.

Research Question 2: What recommendations do early-career academic staff have for improving the mentorship process?

Assertion 1: Participants see merit in having both informal and formal mentorship structures but seem to think a somewhat more formal structure should be in place to cater to the needs of new faculty.

As the mentorship within his department was more informal in nature, Basil shared the following thoughts:

There is something about a more formal process ... the ideal for me would be to go when I want ... when I think I need it ... so even if someone offers advice, again it's not something that I feel a particular weight, um, that I must do this thing. The more formal part is having someone who is more consciously keeping track, checking in, asking questions, but not with the sort of heavy weight. So to me that would be kind of ideal, rather than being slotted into some sort of formal structure and system that I might not always find very helpful. Or that might be a little bit intimidating.

Thus, he felt something formal was needed but not necessarily conceptualised as a formal system with rules and regulations. Indeed,

he felt that a formal system might actually be more intimidating, thus perhaps undermining the intended benefits of the mentorship process. Briar thought that both structures could be in place, with the formal aspect providing a pool of mentors who were available and willing to offer their expertise to those needing support. The informal aspect could emerge naturally and organically. He stated:

So it could be both. A formal programme shows the initiative ... shows something different about the (department) in terms of that direct interest or effort to ensure that there is mentorship. But an informal process also works. The only thing I'd say is from a formal or informal perspective, having the pool of people because usually a mentee goes searching for the mentor ... and not the mentor go searching for the mentee. Because there could be somebody who is interested in mentoring me but I have no such interest in that person. So from the perspective of formality, it could mean that there is a formal slate of persons who are put up to see if persons need mentors, here are the persons.

Assertion 2: Mentees must recognise that even whilst having a mentor, they can still exercise autonomy.

Participants were vocal in advising mentees to maintain their own sense of autonomy even whilst drawing on the expertise of their mentors. They highlighted in particular the need to exercise their own judgement in situations as this would build their confidence and self-efficacy in various aspects of academia. Olive and Daisy highlighted this succinctly. Olive said, "She gives good advice. She's an advisor. At the end of the day, you know the final decision rests with the mentee. Nobody can tell you what to do". Daisy voiced, "You can't spoonfeed the mentee. That's important. So you can't give them everything." Lily, with slightly more detail, shared:

And one of the things she did was give me maybe the first semester she gave me one lecture to plan and deliver. And she supervised it ... but that was one of the earliest forms of mentoring I got. And she would talk me through ... One of the things she would invite me to assist with developing materials ... when she had to do a case study, cause we develop the case study test from scratch, and she asked

me to do the questions. And so I got some autonomy as well. And all of that helps, you know, with the confidence-building.

Thus, Lily highlighted one of the benefits of this autonomy as the enhancement of confidence within the new academic staff member.

Associated with the idea of autonomy, the research participants spoke to the notion of boundary-setting within the mentor-mentee relationship. This was seen as important, given that the relationship is one existing within a professional context. Daisy believed that, as with any professional relationship, these parameters should be clear:

You have to set some boundaries in terms of expectations ... even if it's informal ... your mentor may not be your friend ... setting expectations from the outset and perhaps the relationship between mentor and mentee may change over time. But understanding from the offset how you're going to relate with each other is important. Because it's a professional relationship.

Olive raised a similar viewpoint articulating that "And you the mentee, you cannot be looking for a mother or father or a bunununu¹ friend. A mentor is not really your bunununu friend. Yes, you're going to laugh and talk. But you have to be willing to listen". Olive therefore underscored that, at its core, the relationship was a professional one, even whilst there might be moments of light-heartedness within the interactions.

Discussion

The early-career academics who participated in our research provided deep insights with respect to their experiences of mentoring, much of which aligned with the existing literature. These individuals indicated positive experiences since joining the faculty, finding fulfilment in their teaching and in sharing their work with colleagues who had similar interests and/or who had an interest in their research undertakings. They also appreciated that the university offered various opportunities for professional growth. Despite this, similar

¹ In Jamaican patois, a "bunununu friend" means someone close to you.

to what is documented in the literature, these individuals desired support in areas such as research and publications and orientation to the norms of their departments (see Sargent & Rienties, 2022; Zimmerman, 2021). Thus, these individuals welcomed the mentors who offered them support and guidance as they desired socialization into the academic norms of their departments and the wider university (Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Of interest, whilst the need for mentors who possessed attributes in both the academic and psychosocial domains — as outlined in Yob and Crawford's (2012) Mentoring Model — was voiced, the desire for mentors who had competence, could offer induction experiences, and were available (academic attributes) were the attributes foregrounded by participants.

Participants described receiving mentorship through both informal and formal structures (Newman, 2022) and indicated receiving support from more than one mentor in some instances. Additionally, where neither formal nor informal structures existed in their departments, they sought mentorship in some cases from those external to the faculty, including from other universities. Notwithstanding this, they felt that the mentors offered critical support for the beginning stages in their careers as academics and their progression in areas such as teaching, research, and publications. The participants did not simply view mentorship as a purely hierarchical relationship. Rather, they saw mentorship as something mutual or reciprocal in nature, from which both mentor and mentee benefitted (Ferguson & Ellis, 2022; Straus et al., 2013). Further, they outlined a clear need for those benefitting from the mentorship process to help others as they progressed to students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and other early-career scholars.

Based on their experiences, participants shared several important recommendations for developing a culture of mentorship within the faculty. They supported the idea of a formal mentoring structure (however that might be conceptualised), so that scholars are not neglected or overlooked at the onset of their careers. Indeed, this formal mentoring can ensure capacity-building and output in the

realm of higher education (Cohall, 2021). This may necessitate that mentoring be officially recognised in promotion and tenure processes (Sargent & Rienties, 2022), particularly given the ever-increasing work demands of academics. This is an important consideration since the areas of research, teaching, and other academic work featured strongest in the participants' experiences in terms of what they desired from mentors and what they received from them. Though the findings of the research suggest that they recognised that the psychological functions of mentoring were important, their manifest understanding of how mentorship works was driven by career progression.

They also suggested the need for clear expectations (Straus et al., 2013) to be outlined at the onset of the relationship so that boundaries are not transgressed. Although they were gaining from the mentorship relationship in various ways, the participants indicated that this did not negate the need for themselves and other mentees to exercise their own autonomy and decision-making as it pertains to their duties and career progression.

Therefore, in terms of empirical achievements, the study demonstrated that a segment of the Caribbean's early-career faculty mentoring experiences resonates with the global understanding that there is a need for structures of mentorship which are sensitive to promoting autonomous scholars. Another noteworthy point is that the participants in this study seemed very proactive in externally seeking the material and personal resources they lacked within the institution. The findings of the study presented a dominant hierarchical mentorship model in practice, which is a slight departure from Bottoms et al.'s (2013) critique that this model could stifle agency.

Recommendations

In this section, we consider some of the practical implications for implementation and research and policy directions to be pursued, inspired from the findings and discussion. These are our recommendations to accompany those voiced by our research participants.

Training and Support

Leadership has to be strategically centred in any attempt at moving the mentorship agenda. In this light, deans and department heads should have access to structured, context-specific training to enable them to provide career guidance for the faculty members they supervise who are at various career stages. This training would help them understand the unique needs of each career stage and empower them with strategies for practical ways to facilitate and nurture career growth. Some of these strategies could include, for example, providing targeted feedback, goal setting, creating a context for co-producing research, teaching resources or other professional learning activities, where desirable attitudes and skills can be modelled for early-career faculty members. Though the university has an orientation, departmental onboarding is also necessary to acclimatize new members to the department's culture.

Research

As leaders in HEIs contemplate the strategic role their institutions will continue to play in national development, it would be important to widen the scope of the current discourse about early-career academics' experiences with mentorship through gleaning insights among a wider cross-section of Jamaican universities. This research would ascertain, among other things, national mentorship needs, structures in place, and levels of success achieved by them. To balance the perspectives, it would also be important to understand from Jamaican university top leaders the role they believe mentorship plays in educational organizational development and the career trajectory of early-career academics, how they have been supporting the effort, and the goals they intend to achieve with their pursuits.

Policy

In addition to the research and practice implications, policy considerations are also possible. Based on the participants' descriptions of their experiences with mentoring, it is recommended that the university consider a broad-based and structured framework of

mentorship. Such a framework should be accompanied by a policy development and implementation process guided by succession planning principles, which display sensitivity to talent development, career planning and management, and advanced replacement strategies.

Conclusion

There are some limitations to the study. As a qualitative study, the findings of the research are not generalizable to other early-career academic staff members. Additionally, given that the study focused on participants from one faculty, the voices of those from other disciplines are absent. Finally, given the gender make-up of the staff within the faculty, there are more female than male participants.

Despite these limitations, what this research has demonstrated is that the primacy of mentorship for early-career academics should not be understated as it continues to emerge as an area of consistent need in HEIs. Though early-career academics should continue seeking ways they can become more agentic in the exercise of autonomy over how their career progresses and the support systems that they can activate, they will achieve better success if done within an institutional frame. For this, they need support. Within this context, for those institutions striving for continuous growth, the legitimacy and importance of a well-equipped academic core is critical, and the transformative power of mentorship should be harnessed to accommodate the upward trajectory they desire. Mentorship should be prioritized within HEIs because of its potential role in enhancing the academic and professional development of early-career academics to improve their pedagogical competence, content knowledge, and leadership skills. Therefore, HEI leaders, as the custodians of our educational institutions, are tasked with maximizing the potential of this invaluable resource through their transformational leadership capabilities and situating mentorship more centrally in their organizational leadership and management practices.

Therese Ferguson, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the School of Education (SOE) at The University of the West Indies, Mona Campus in Jamaica. Her research interests centre on ESD, peace education, climate change education and researcher development.

Email: therese.ferguson02@uwimona.edu.jm

Ann-Marie Wilmot, EdD is an award-winning lecturer in Educational Leadership and Management at The University of the West Indies, Mona. Her research examines the intricate dynamics of educational leadership, an area in which she has made significant contributions through numerous publications. Her scholarship emphasises the critical development of middle leaders, focusing on marginalized experiences and concepts significant to their professional practices, including power relations, wellness, governance, and leadership preparedness.

Email: anamariawilmot@yahoo.com

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