Journal of Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities
http://www.jssshonline.com/
JSSSH, Volume 11, No. 2, 2025, 43-56
ISSN: 2413-9270

Mentoring of academic staff in higher education: the case of the National University of Lesotho

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Abstract

This study examines mentoring practices among academic staff at the National University of Lesotho (NUL), recognising that the higher education context is often shaped by Western ideologies. The paper is grounded in the Cup Framework, with emphasis on alignment between mentoring content and mentees' developmental capacities. It explores how mentoring is understood and practised in a resource-constrained African university. Using a qualitative design, open-ended questionnaires were administered to 15 senior and 20 junior academics selected through purposive sampling. The data were analysed thematically, and the findings indicate that both mentors and mentees view mentoring as a relational and mutually beneficial process that enhances research productivity, professional identity, confidence, and institutional continuity. The mentors emphasised reciprocity and mentee commitment, while the mentees expressed a strong need for structured, research-oriented guidance. The paper argues that mentoring at NUL remains largely informal, uneven, and constrained by heavy workloads, limited coordination, and insufficient institutional recognition. Demographic factors such as age and gender were perceived to influence mentoring dynamics to varying degrees. The study concludes that although mentoring at NUL has significant developmental potential, its impact is limited by structural challenges. The study proposes a hybrid model integrating formal, peer, and research-focused mentoring to strengthen sustainability and equity.

Keywords: Academic mentoring, Higher education, Professional development, Institutional capacity, Qualitative research, National University of Lesotho

Introduction

Cultivating professional relationships at the workplace has been recognised in research as central to fostering growth, collaboration, and sustained performance. One such relationship is a one-on-one developmental interaction, generally known as mentorship, which plays an important influential role in shaping employees' professional trajectories. Although the terms mentorship, supervision, and coaching are sometimes used interchangeably, mentorship stands out as a distinct form of guided professional support that extends beyond task-based oversight. According to Qureshi & Unlu (2025), mentorship involves a more experienced individual offering sustained guidance, knowledge, and psychosocial support to a less experienced colleague to promote both personal and professional development. This view aligns with the understanding that mentorship is an informal but intentional process of transmitting knowledge and social capital over time. Recent scholarship (Goh & Richardson, 2024; DeJoseph & Carosella, 2025; Qureshi & Unlu, 2025) continues to affirm these elements, emphasising the relational, sustained, and development-oriented nature of mentoring relationships in higher education and professional environments.

It has been argued that mentorship is essentially relationship-based and dependent on meaningful, ongoing communication. However, despite a growing body of research, significant gaps persist, particularly regarding the applicability of mentoring models across diverse global contexts. Much of the existing literature is situated in Western educational settings, which may not reflect the realities of institutions in Africa or other under-resourced regions. To support this, Egege and Kutieleh (2015)

highlight the cultural variability inherent in mentorship. The authors note that mentoring relationships are deeply shaped by cultural norms, expectations, and power dynamics. Similarly, Akuneeva, Maslova, & Platonova (2025) argue that there is a need for a broader, context-sensitive understanding of mentorship that accounts for institutional, cultural, and resource-related dynamics. The present study is situated within this emerging discourse. It recognises the need to explore mentorship as it unfolds within specific local contexts such as the National University of Lesotho (NUL).

Mentorship in higher education is commonly regarded as a cornerstone of academic development, as it nurtures independent scholars who contribute to institutional excellence. It helps promote clarity in academic identity formation, build confidence, facilitate professional networking, and foster skill development (Goh & Richardson, 2024; DeJoseph & Carosella, 2025). Moreover, the art of mentoring benefits both mentors and mentees in different ways. As Killela, Adynski, & Williams (2025) put it, mentors experience professional renewal, enhanced leadership skills, and expanded collaborative networks, while mentees gain critical career guidance, research capacity, and professional confidence. These dual benefits underscore the significance of mentorship not only for individuals but also for institutional growth and sustainability.

Literature review

In higher education, mentoring has long been recognised as a fundamental mechanism for supporting the professional, academic, and personal development of academic staff. It involves a dynamic, supportive relationship in which mentors facilitate the development of mentees' skills, knowledge, and professional identity. According to Argente-Linares, Pérez-López, & Ordóñez-Solana (2016), mentoring supports the mentee's development by drawing on the mentor's experiences and insights. Many scholars (Form, Schlichting, & Kaernbach, 2017; Shore, 2017) conceptualise a mentor as a senior or more experienced individual assigned to function as a guide, advisor, or counsellor to a junior colleague. Shore (2017) describes the mentor's responsibilities as including offering emotional and professional support, training the mentee to improve work performance, and recommending the mentee for advancement where appropriate.

In academia, mentoring typically involves sharing disciplinary knowledge, supervising research, cultivating professional networks, and advising on career development. Baker et al. (2020) emphasise that institutions of higher learning should strengthen mentorship through enhanced onboarding practices, incentives for senior staff participation, and structured peer-mentoring initiatives. Therefore, an academic mentor is someone who takes a dedicated interest in helping a junior academic to succeed, drawing on their own knowledge of the challenges inherent in academic careers and modelling professional conduct and responsible scholarship.

Generally, mentoring programmes in higher education differ in structure and purpose. According to Hobson & Taylor (2020), there is a distinction between formal and informal mentoring models. They posit that an institution or administrative unit typically establishes formal mentoring programmes and includes structured recruitment, mentor training, defined objectives, and established timelines. These programs allow mentors and mentees some flexibility in selection while ensuring that the mentoring process is goal-oriented, productive, and supported institutionally. By contrast, informal mentoring develops naturally without the need for structured matching mechanisms or explicit institutional oversight. It has been noted that informal mentoring often arises naturally through networking or collegial relationships and is more flexible. However, it lacks the formal objectives and timeframes typical of structured programmes. It tends to be volunteer-driven and often yields indirect institutional benefits, such as improved morale and increased employee retention (Hobson & Taylor, 2020). In addition to the formal and informal mentoring, the peer-to-peer mentoring models have gained prominence in academic settings. DeJoseph & Carosella (2025) argue that the peer-to-peer mentoring models are effective in fostering diversity, inclusivity, and supportive networks among underrepresented groups in academia. According to them, these models rely on reciprocal learning and shared experiences rather than hierarchical relationships, making them particularly effective for collective empowerment and institutional belonging.

Research in education has shown that mentoring correlates positively with improved academic performance and increased research productivity. In particular, structured mentoring programs provide

mentees with targeted guidance in navigating institutional expectations, academic publishing, and research funding mechanisms. In addition, mentoring plays a crucial role in academic socialisation and integration. Mentoring also contributes significantly to career advancement and leadership development. Through mentoring, academics gain access to opportunities, networks, and institutional knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. As Hobson & Taylor (2020) put it, mentoring remains central in preparing emerging scholars for tenure-track roles. This is supported by Killela et al. (2025), who note that doctoral candidates and early-career academics benefit immensely from mentorship in developing core competencies, including teaching, research, and service, that define academic success. More specifically, mentors provide support in navigating the often-challenging transition from doctoral training to independent academic careers, including guidance in grant writing, publication strategies, and pedagogical development.

However, despite the value of mentoring in higher education, it continues to face several challenges. The literature cites time constraints as one of the most common barriers, with both mentors and mentees struggling to balance mentoring with heavy teaching, research, and administrative workloads. Another challenge revealed in the literature is the mismatched mentor–mentee pairings. This is because, as Qureshi & Unlu (2025) posit, mismatches in personality, expectations, or communication styles can hinder relationship-building and reduce the effectiveness of the mentoring process. The complexity of the mentoring relationship itself can present difficulties. Akuneeva et al. (2025) highlight the "duality of care" in mentoring, particularly in contexts where mentors must simultaneously support mentees while fostering their independence. Striking this balance can be challenging, especially in non-selective or resource-constrained academic environments where mentorship demands are high.

Therefore, effective mentoring programmes in higher education require careful design, clear expectations, and institutional commitment. According to Egege and Kutieleh (2015), an explicit definition of roles, boundaries, and expectations is necessary to enhance program clarity and evaluation. This is because clear guidelines will help prevent confusion, ensure accountability, and support meaningful outcomes. Another best practice that has been identified is integrating mentoring into teaching and learning frameworks. To support this, Goh and Richardson (2024) demonstrate that embedding mentorship principles within academic curricula enhances student engagement, strengthens professional development, and fosters collaborative learning cultures among staff. Institutional support, including incentives for senior mentors, recognition of mentoring as a form of academic labour, and adequate training, is also essential. As Baker et al. (2020) argue, universities that invest in structured peer mentoring and onboarding initiatives experience higher levels of staff satisfaction, professional development, and scholarly productivity.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used in this study to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings that academic staff at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) attach to the concept of mentoring. Previous research (Qureshi & Unlu, 2025; Bright et al., 2025) argue that qualitative methods, such as open-ended questionnaires, allow participants to articulate their perspectives in greater depth. The data for the study was collected using a questionnaire that incorporated open-ended questions. The open-ended questionnaire was the sole data collection instrument. It was selected to allow participants to provide reflective, detailed responses while accommodating time constraints and the institution's everyday workload pressures. The questionnaires were administered to two purposively selected groups consisting of senior academic staff considered mentors and junior academic staff considered mentees. The mentor group comprised 15 senior academics, with 10 in the Associate Professor category and 5 in the full Professor category, while the mentee group comprised 20 junior academics, with 10 in the Lecturer category and 10 in the Senior Lecturer category. The use of purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct experience with mentoring, either as mentors or mentees, thereby enhancing the relevance and richness of the collected data.

There were 10 open-ended questions in each questionnaire. The questions were designed to elicit detailed explanations, descriptions, and reflections aligned with the study's qualitative orientation. A demographic section was included to capture the participants' gender, age, and nationality, to determine whether these variables influenced their experiences and perceptions of mentorship at NUL. The

questionnaire for mentors aimed to gather insights into the importance of mentoring, mentors' views on structured versus informal mentoring, the benefits of mentorship, the techniques and strategies used to guide junior academics, and the mentoring models they employ. The questions encouraged mentors to reflect on why junior staff should be mentored and how mentoring contributes to academic growth and institutional development. On the other hand, the questionnaire for mentees was designed to explore their needs, expectations, and perceptions of the mentorship experience. The mentees were requested to comment on their desire for mentorship, the availability and suitability of senior staff as mentors, their views on what constitutes a good mentor, and the type of mentorship they believed NUL should adopt. They were also asked to reflect on the role of mentorship in their job satisfaction, professional happiness, and career progression.

The Cup Framework developed by Shore (2017) was used to analyse and interpret the data. This framework emphasises the relationship between “content”, which is what the mentees learn, and “context”, which is the capacity of the mentees to absorb and apply learning. It also highlighted the mentor’s role in expanding the mentee’s capacity, also known as the “cup”, rather than merely providing more information. Using the Cup Framework allowed the researcher to examine whether mentors and mentees at NUL understood their roles in the mentorship process and whether mentoring interactions aligned with the developmental principles of expanding capacity, promoting autonomy, and encouraging collaboration. The framework further guided the identification of patterns in how mentees perceived their readiness for mentorship and how mentors conceptualised their responsibilities in supporting junior staff.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Although formal institutional ethical approval was not required for this research, given its minimal-risk nature and focus on professional experiences, participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

Data presentation and analysis

In this section, the data collected through a questionnaire administered to 15 mentors and 20 mentees at NUL is presented and analysed. As mentioned earlier, each set of questionnaires had 10 questions. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, in which responses were read repeatedly, coded, and organised into themes by grouping similar patterns and meanings. These themes were then interpreted using the Cup Framework, which emphasises alignment between the content offered by mentors and mentees' capacity and context to absorb it.

Responses from the Mentors

This section presents the perspectives of senior academic staff at NUL regarding mentorship. It examines how mentors perceive their roles, the approaches and models they utilise, and the techniques they employ to guide junior colleagues. It also examines their perspectives on the benefits of mentoring, the challenges they encounter, and the institutional factors that impact mentorship.

The first question aimed to understand how NUL senior academics perceive the concept of mentorship. To this question, three main views were expressed, as shown below.

1. *I see mentorship as a two-way process where I am supposed to help junior staff hone their teaching, research, and innovative skills, but where I also expect such staff to be serious in these areas and show commitment to professional growth. (8 respondents)*
2. *I view mentorship as a process where I can assist a young academic to grow professionally and become an accomplished scholar, especially in research. (5 respondents)*
3. *To me, mentorship is a relationship between two people where the individual with more experience, knowledge, and connections (in this case, myself) can pass along what they have learned to a more junior individual within a particular field. (2 respondents)*

The above responses show a relational understanding of mentoring. This aligns with Qureshi & Unlu (2025), who describe mentorship as a reciprocal, growth-oriented partnership rather than a unidirectional transfer of expertise.

When asked whether mentoring is important at NUL, all respondents indicated affirmatively, citing the following reasons:

1. *Yes, mentoring is important at NUL because of the transformative effect it can have on the mentee. Mentoring can be a gateway to all the other resources that a young academic needs to fulfil their potential. (5 respondents)*
2. *Yes, because mentors can keep mentees engaged in their academic path, boost their academic performance, and increase their chances of improving on their academic achievements. (4 respondents)*
3. *Yes, because mentoring relationships aid with not only the academic aspects but also the development of non-cognitive and time-management skills that are critical for overall success. (3 respondents)*
4. *Yes, mentoring can help in building confidence in both the mentor and mentee. When you help your mentee succeed, you can gain confidence in your skills and abilities. It demonstrates qualities that support others' improvement and development. At the same time, your mentee gains confidence in their ability to succeed. (2 respondents)*
5. *Yes, because mentoring can help in strengthening the institution where one works. With the knowledge and experience, the mentees will understand their roles and expectations and form positive work habits that will make them more efficient and productive. (1 respondent)*

The above responses reveal that the mentors recognise the value and importance of mentorship across different aspects of academia. This is supported by Bright et al. (2025), who argue that mentoring is integral to sustaining academic excellence and research output.

In the following question, participants were asked if they saw any benefits in being a mentor. The respondents identified multiple personal benefits associated with mentorship, as indicated below:

1. *Yes. As a mentor, I feel fulfilled when I see those I mentor progress in their careers and even in their personal lives. Knowing that I have made a positive impact on someone's life or career makes me feel good (6 respondents)*
2. *Yes. The mentor benefits because s/he can lead the future generation in an area they care about and ensure that best practices are passed along (3 respondents)*
3. *Yes, my interactions with my mentees offer numerous opportunities to practice and build my interpersonal skills, such as communication, active listening, empathy, and patience (3 respondents).*
4. *Yes, being a mentor helps in strengthening my knowledge, in that when I work with a mentee, I share relevant knowledge gained through my career and experiences, and sharing this knowledge reinforces it within me (2 respondents).*
5. *Yes, being a mentor can expand my network in that while I can introduce my mentees to contacts to help build their network, they may, in turn, have relevant or interesting connections to share with me, which can aid my career (1 respondent).*

These findings correspond with scholarship indicating that mentoring enhances mentors' self-efficacy, leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and scholarly identity (Eby et al., 2013).

The next question was to determine the techniques that the mentors use during their mentoring sessions. To this, mentors described several techniques aligned with recognised mentoring practices in higher education, as shown below:

1. *I accompany my mentees in the process by participating in the mentoring exercise alongside the mentees and supporting them, for instance, through co-publications and conference presentations (8 respondents).*
2. *I catalyse my mentees by challenging them into change to provoke a different way of thinking, a change in identity, or a re-ordering of values (4 respondents).*
3. *I try to show my mentees what to do by demonstrating a skill or activity and expect them to reproduce it (2 respondents).*
4. *I harvest and harness the skills of my mentees by assessing and defining the utility and value of their skills (1 respondent).*

These techniques align with Qureshi and Unlu's (2025) categorisation of mentor roles as guides, facilitators, and catalysts.

When asked which mentoring model the mentors use and why, they identified various mentoring models guiding their relationships as reflected below:

1. *I use the nurturing model because I play the role of a parent in that I try to create an open, supportive environment where my mentees can learn and try things themselves (6 respondents).*
2. *I adopt the friendship model where I act more as a peer to my mentees, mainly because we are colleagues (3 respondents).*
3. *I use what I will call the cloning model, where I groom my mentees to become more like myself (3 respondents)*
4. *I adopt an apprenticeship model where my mentees and I have a professional relationship because I want them to take mentorship seriously (2 respondents).*
5. *I use the supervisory model where I provide answers to the many questions and concerns from my mentees and advise them on the best course of action (1 respondent).*

These models align with the typologies documented by Bright et al. (2025), who argue that effective mentorship is context-dependent and influenced by both personal and institutional factors. The coexistence of multiple models suggests adaptability, a feature praised in mentoring scholarship.

The following question aimed to determine what mentors consider the benefits of mentorship to be. In response, they highlighted the following benefits:

1. *Mentorship leads to career development in that junior staff can learn the skills and behaviours that they need to advance to higher-responsibility positions. It enables junior staff to advance professionally and deepen their understanding of their work. (5 respondents).*
2. *Mentorship leads to the transfer of knowledge and skills. Through mentorship, junior staff can acquire more knowledge and skills from their mentors, which will help them accomplish their tasks as academic staff. It provides them with access to experts who can offer feedback and answers to some of their questions (5 respondents).*
3. *Mentoring provides me with opportunities to practice and cultivate specific important skills like leadership and communication skills, because as a mentor, I listen actively to my mentees, I advise them, I even question them and provide them feedback and guidance. Additionally, mentoring provides me with a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment, knowing that I am leaving a legacy behind (4 respondents).*
4. *Mentorship can help institutions with the retention of much-needed staff. It provides high-potential staff with one-on-one guidance from senior staff, helping them engage, develop their skills, and increase their likelihood of staying with the institution (1 respondent).*

From the responses, the mentors acknowledge that mentoring benefits the mentees, the institution, and the mentors. They believe that the institution benefits enormously from the process. This is supported by Eby et al. (2013), who argue that mentorship enhances organisational performance, research capacity, and staff stability.

When asked whether the mentorship at NUL is formal or informal, the respondents said the following.

1. *To me, it is informal because there are no guiding principles and no terms of reference for mentorship at NUL (9 respondents).*
2. *I think it is formal because it is considered part of the expectations of senior academic staff, although it is not formally documented nor implemented systematically (3 respondents).*
3. *I would say it is both formal and informal because, as senior academics, we are aware that we need to groom others who will succeed us, and this, to me, makes it formal. However, because it is not coordinated through specific regulations or terms, it is an informal exercise undertaken by staff as they see fit (3 respondents).*

The above responses show differing views on the type of mentorship practised at NUL. These views result from a lack of clear policy guidelines on mentoring at NUL. This is supported by Qureshi & Unlu (2025), who say that in African and global universities, mentorship often operates through informal networks shaped by departmental culture.

The following question sought to determine whether demographic factors, such as age, gender, and nationality, are motivating factors in the mentorship of academic staff at NUL. To this, they responded as follows:

Age variable: All respondents agreed that age plays a significant role in motivating academic staff to mentor. They argued that senior or older academics are often perceived as more experienced and thus have a moral or professional obligation to guide their younger colleagues.
Gender variable: There were two views on this variable, as shown below.

1. *Women mentor other women to promote equity (8 respondents)*
2. *Mentorship is based on competence rather than gender (7 respondents)*

Nationality: This variable was not found to be a strong motivator, although some senior staff felt responsible for mentoring younger colleagues to build national academic capacity.
These responses show that the respondents do not place any importance on demographics, suggesting they view mentoring holistically.

When asked if they think NUL has good senior staff who, through mentoring, can promote academic growth and achievement, the respondents had the following to say:

1. *Yes, I believe NUL has highly qualified and experienced senior staff who play an important role in promoting academic growth and achievement. Many of them have extensive research backgrounds and are actively engaged in supervising junior academics, supporting publication, and assisting with grant writing. If done properly, their mentorship and leadership will contribute meaningfully to maintaining academic standards and promoting a culture of excellence at NUL. (10 respondents)*
2. *Yes, to an extent, NUL has good senior staff who can promote academic growth, but the potential is not fully realised. While there are committed and capable senior academics, their impact is sometimes limited by workload pressures, lack of structured mentorship programmes, or insufficient institutional support. As a result, some junior staff members feel that opportunities for growth and collaboration are unevenly distributed across departments. (3 respondents)*
3. *Not really. Although there are a few outstanding individuals, many senior staff members at NUL are not actively involved in mentoring or promoting academic achievement. Some are overwhelmed by administrative duties or are disengaged from research activities. There is a need for renewed commitment, structured mentorship initiatives, and performance incentives to ensure that senior academics effectively contribute to the professional development of junior colleagues. (2 respondents)*

These responses reveal that NUL has the capacity for mentoring, but factors such as workload and the lack of a structured mentorship programme are preventing the institution from leveraging its potential. This is supported by Bright et al. (2025), who argue that mentorship effectiveness depends not only on individual capacity but also on institutional conditions, including workload distribution and recognition systems.

The last question sought to identify what the mentors consider as challenges of mentoring at NUL, and what they think could be the reason(s) behind them. To this question, the respondents identified the following key challenges.

1. *One of the biggest challenges is time. As senior staff, we are often overloaded with teaching, postgraduate supervision, and administrative duties, leaving us with insufficient time to provide proper mentorship. Even when we want to help, it is difficult to meet regularly with the mentees or give them detailed guidance. (10 respondents)*
2. *The fact that mentorship at NUL is informal makes it inconsistent. There is no clear programme or guidelines to follow. As a result, some junior staff receive much support while others receive very little. Without structure, mentorship cannot be done properly. (7 respondents)*
3. *Sometimes the challenge is motivation. Not all mentors are equally committed, and some mentees do not take the initiative to learn. If either side is not engaged, the mentorship is ineffective. Both parties need to see value in the relationship for it to succeed. (3 respondents)*

From the responses, it is evident that workload, time constraints, a lack of guidelines and policies, and a lack of motivation are among the challenges mentors at NUL face. This is supported by previous research (Qureshi & Unlu, 2025; Eby et al., 2013) in African higher education systems, which shows that resource constraints, administrative burdens, and the absence of structured mentoring policies hinder the development of a robust mentorship culture.

Responses from the Mentees

This section explores how junior academic staff at NUL view mentorship. It examines their understanding of mentorship, the benefits they believe it offers, the qualities they value most in a mentor, and their suggestions for improving mentoring practices.

The first question asked junior academic staff to share their thoughts on mentorship. In response, they described mentorship in the following ways:

1. *Mentorship is seen as a responsibility of senior academics, who should guide junior staff in teaching, research, and innovation. This support is viewed as essential for professional growth (10 respondents).*
2. *Mentorship is understood as a process where senior academics help junior staff develop professionally, with the goal of becoming recognised scholars through research and publication (5 respondents).*
3. *I see mentorship as a relationship between a senior and a junior academic staff member, where the junior academic staff member can benefit from the experience, knowledge, and connections of the senior academic staff member for academic growth (5 respondents).*

From the above responses, it is evident that the mentees view mentorship as a developmental relationship that fosters academic growth. These views are closely aligned with those of senior staff. They are supported by Argente-Linares et al. (2016), who emphasise mentorship as a developmental relationship where the mentor supports skill acquisition, knowledge transfer, and career progression.

The second question sought to determine whether respondents considered mentoring an important activity at NUL. To this question, all respondents agreed that mentorship is important, as seen below.

1. *Yes, mentoring is a significant activity because mentors support growth by encouraging and enabling the mentees' professional or personal development (5 respondents).*
2. *Yes, because mentors serve as a source of knowledge by providing specific insights and information that helps the mentee succeed. Young academics can benefit from such guidance, as it helps them feel comfortable in the role more quickly (5 respondents).*
3. *Yes, because mentors offer encouragement and support, especially when the mentee is struggling to perform their job or reach a goal. This encouragement can motivate them to keep moving forward despite challenges (4 respondents)*
4. *Yes, because mentors have relevant experience from which mentees can leverage for their professional aspirations and goals (3 respondents).*
5. *Yes, because a mentor can help a mentee to set personal and professional development goals, which can help the mentee to focus their efforts and make it easier for the mentor to track and assess progress (2 respondents).*
6. *Yes, because mentors are a free resource who do not require payment from the mentees, and genuinely want to help the mentees grow and establish a more authentic and personal connection (1 respondent).*

The responses show that mentees view mentoring as an important activity for various reasons, including professional and personal growth, academic success, knowledge assimilation, and high performance. This is supported by Baker et al. (2020), who say that mentorship in academia enhances job satisfaction, performance, and overall professional development, particularly for early-career staff navigating complex academic roles.

When asked whether they needed a mentor, all junior academics expressed a clear desire for mentorship. The reasons advanced reveal both the practical and aspirational dimensions of mentoring as seen in the following responses:

1. *Yes. A mentor can help me progress in my field by sharing knowledge and opening doors to opportunities I might not otherwise access (8 respondents).*
2. *Yes. Almost every great achiever in history had a mentor. I associate mentorship with excellence and see it as a pathway to achieving it (6 respondents).*
3. *Yes. Mentorship provides guidance and constructive advice that can help me transform my vision into reality (4 respondents).*
4. *Yes. I need a mentor because a good mentor can guide me, help me build a successful career, and shape my professional trajectory (2 respondents).*

From these responses, the mentees are aware that mentorship is central to career advancement and the development of professional identity among junior academics.

The next question explored whom junior academics would prefer as their mentors. In their responses, the mentees reveal a strong desire to be guided by senior, experienced academics, as shown below:

1. *I would like to be mentored by an experienced professor, because I aspire to attain the same academic title in the near future (10 respondents).*
2. *I would prefer a professor with administrative experience, as I aim to become a senior administrator at NUL or elsewhere (7 respondents).*
3. *I would like a mentor from my own field, so that we share a common understanding of roles, responsibilities, and future possibilities (3 respondents).*

The above responses highlight the value of mentors who combine academic expertise, administrative knowledge, and alignment with discipline-specific standards. This resonates with findings by Killela et al. (2025), who note that mentees often seek mentors with both scholarly authority and practical insight into institutional systems.

To further explore the relevance of mentoring for junior academic staff, they were asked to identify the advantages of being mentored. Their responses highlighted both career progression and personal development, as shown below:

1. *Mentorship helps me understand what it takes to advance in my career. I receive advice on research, publishing, and even navigating university politics, which makes the path clearer and less overwhelming (8 respondents).*
2. *Mentorship helps me build essential skills such as academic writing, supervision, and presentation. It also boosts my confidence, because I know I have someone experienced to guide me and provide constructive feedback (6 respondents).*
3. *One of the advantages is that mentorship opens doors. I get introduced to professional networks, collaborations, and opportunities that I would not have access to on my own. It really helps me grow academically and professionally. (5 respondents).*
4. *Mentoring helps me to receive meaningful direction and guidance from my mentor, who plays the role of my advisor (1 respondent).*

It is clear from the above responses that junior academic staff benefit from mentorship, and the advantages they have mentioned demonstrate that they appreciate the value mentorship brings to their academic and professional lives, as well as beyond.

When asked to describe the characteristics of a good mentor, they said the following.

1. *A good mentor is one whom the mentee must feel comfortable with, and who has a lot to offer the mentee that is directly related to his/her field of work or study (8 respondents).*
2. *In my view, a good mentor must have extensive experience in a related or relevant field and a similar educational background to those s/he is mentoring (4 respondents).*
3. *To me, a good mentor should be a friendly and genuine personality, with a credible and trustworthy character (3 respondents).*
4. *A good mentor should be someone who does not feel threatened by empowering others and who is open to learning from the mentee (3 respondents).*
5. *A good mentor should have gone through and overcome relatable challenges like the mentee and should have flexible mentoring styles (2 respondents).*

The responses above all point to the expectations that junior academic staff have of senior academic staff. They all expect senior academic staff to have a positive impact on their mentees' academic and professional growth. These characteristics align with the mentor roles described by Shore (2017) and Argente-Linares et al. (2016).

The next question was intended to prompt junior academic staff to reflect on how mentorship could be made successful by both parties. In response, the mentees stated the following:

1. *Success in mentorship comes from open communication and respect. Mentors should listen to our challenges without judgment, and mentees should be honest about their needs and goals. Mutual understanding makes the relationship productive. (7 respondents)*

2. *Mentorship is a two-way process, and both the mentor and the mentee should benefit from the experience. One day, you might use this experience to mentor someone who is in the same position you are in now. It is essential to pass on the lessons you have learned to others, just as your mentor has passed on to you. That is how you will continue to benefit and grow from this important relationship for the rest of your life. (5 respondents)*
3. *Mentoring requires effort and preparation. It takes time, patience, and commitment. For mentorship to be effective, both the mentor and the mentee must be engaged through regular meetings and follow-ups. If one party is not committed, the process fails (3 respondents).*
4. *As a mentee, I must have clear, specific, and measurable objectives. It is not the mentor's job to define my goals. I must also be open and eager to learn (3 respondents).*
5. *Mentorship succeeds when there are clear goals and responsibilities for both parties. It should involve more than advice. It requires a plan, deadlines, and a way to track progress so that expectations are clear (2 respondents).*

From these responses, it can be said that the mentees want a structured mentorship programme with guidelines. This is supported by previous research (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015; Goh & Richardson, 2024), which advocates structured mentorship practices, clear expectations, and reciprocal engagement as key to achieving sustainable outcomes.

When asked whether they believe NUL has strong senior staff capable of mentoring junior academics and fostering academic growth and achievement, the respondents shared the following views:

1. *Yes, I think NUL has excellent senior staff who genuinely support academic growth. Many are well-experienced and approachable, taking time to guide us in research, publishing, and career planning. Their commitment to helping younger academics succeed is evident (7 respondents).*
2. *I would say yes and no. While we have senior staff with the knowledge and experience to promote academic growth, not all are actively engaged in mentoring. Some are too occupied with administrative duties or heavy teaching loads. If mentorship were more structured, its impact would be much greater (7 respondents).*
3. *Yes, but I do not think NUL has enough senior staff who are truly invested in mentoring or promoting academic achievement. A few are doing well, but most are either overloaded or not interested. There is a serious need for motivation and proper mentorship programmes to make a difference (6 respondents).*

These responses show that the lack of a formal mentoring programme is a challenge to academic achievement and growth. This aligns with previous research (Akuneeva et al., 2025; Qureshi & Unlu, 2025) on the challenges of informal mentorship in higher education, particularly in institutions with heavy administrative and teaching loads.

The next question sought to determine the type of mentorship junior academic staff would recommend at NUL and the reasons behind their preferences. To this, the following responses were obtained.

1. *A structured mentorship programme that pairs junior academics with experienced senior staff. Such a system should include clear goals, timelines, and follow-up sessions to ensure progress. At present, mentorship is largely informal, which means not everyone benefits equally. A formal programme would promote accountability and consistency across departments (11 respondents).*
2. *Peer mentorship could be highly effective. Junior staff sometimes feel intimidated by senior professors, but they are more comfortable learning from colleagues at the same level who bring different strengths. Collaborative mentorship would encourage teamwork and make knowledge sharing more natural (5 respondents).*
3. *Mentorship should focus on research and career development. Many young academics struggle with publishing and building research profiles. A programme that emphasises writing, grant applications, and supervisory skills would significantly enhance academic achievement (4 respondents).*

The above responses show a clear preference for structured, supportive systems, whether through senior guidance, peer collaboration, or targeted research development. They reflect both the need for structured

guidance and the importance of relevance to individual career goals. These recommendations align with DeJoseph & Carosella (2025), emphasising the need for formalised mentoring programs to enhance inclusivity, diversity, and professional outcomes.

The final question asked junior academics what they believe could be done to improve the mentoring situation at NUL. Their responses emphasised the need for structure, capacity-building, and recognition:

1. *NUL should establish a formal mentorship programme with clear guidelines, roles, and timelines. A structured, monitored system would make it easier for mentors and mentees to engage meaningfully and to track progress (9 respondents).*
2. *Providing training for mentors would be very beneficial. Not all senior staff know how to effectively guide or support junior colleagues. Workshops or orientation sessions could equip them with the skills needed to mentor successfully (6 respondents).*
3. *Mentorship should be recognised and rewarded. If senior staff see that mentoring contributes to promotions or performance evaluations, they will take it more seriously. Incentives or recognition could motivate greater participation and commitment (5 respondents).*

The above responses highlight the fact that mentorship structures should be formalised, mentors should be equipped with the necessary skills, and their involvement should be incentivised. The mentees believe these measures could strengthen NUL's mentoring culture and ensure sustainable academic growth. These recommendations are supported by Hobson & Taylor (2020) and Baker et al. (2020), who argue that institutional support, mentor training, and recognition are essential to sustaining effective mentoring practices in higher education.

Discussion of Findings

This section interprets and synthesises the key themes emerging from the data presented in Section 4. Rather than restating individual responses, it integrates the perspectives of both mentors and mentees to examine how mentoring is understood, practised, and constrained within the institutional context of the National University of Lesotho. The discussion is framed by the Cup Framework (Shore, 2017), which emphasises the importance of aligning mentoring content with mentees' developmental capacities and the broader institutional environment. Within this framework, the findings are situated in contemporary scholarship on mentoring in higher education, highlighting how effective mentorship depends not only on individual relationships but also on structural support, institutional culture, and shared expectations.

Mentorship as a Relational and Developmental Practice

The findings suggest that senior academics at NUL primarily conceptualise mentorship as a relational and developmental process, rather than a directive or supervisory function. Mentorship was described as a reciprocal engagement requiring commitment from both mentor and mentee, with an emphasis on dialogue, collaboration, and professional growth. This perspective aligns with the Cup Framework (Shore, 2017), which emphasises expanding the mentee’s capacity rather than simply transferring knowledge. Mentors viewed their role as supporting mentees' gradual movement toward autonomy in teaching, research, and scholarly identity formation. This reflects broader understandings of mentorship in higher education as an enabling and capacity-building practice (Qureshi & Unlu, 2025).

At the same time, mentors’ emphasis on responsibility-sharing and active engagement suggests an implicit expectation that mentees arrive ready and motivated. This finding underscores the influence of both contextual and individual factors in shaping mentoring effectiveness, supporting Akuneeva et al.’s (2025) argument that mentoring relationships are negotiated spaces shaped by personal commitment and institutional conditions.

Perceived Benefits of Mentorship for Individuals and the Institution

Both mentors and mentees consistently described mentorship as beneficial at multiple levels. At the individual level, mentorship was linked to enhanced confidence, a clearer academic identity, improved research capacity, and access to professional networks. For mentors, engaging in mentorship reinforced leadership skills, renewed professional purpose, and strengthened scholarly identity. These dual benefits

align with existing literature, which positions mentorship as mutually enriching and central to academic sustainability (Goh & Richardson, 2024; Killela et al., 2025).

At the institutional level, mentorship was perceived as contributing to academic continuity, staff retention, and the cultivation of a shared academic culture. Participants emphasised its role in transmitting institutional norms, expectations, and standards across generations of academics. This finding underscores the importance of mentorship not only for individual development but also for reinforcing institutional coherence and capacity, particularly within a resource-constrained context like NUL, where sustaining academic excellence depends on strong relational and developmental practices.

Models and Practices of Mentoring: Flexibility and Adaptation

The findings indicate that mentoring practices at NUL are characterised by flexibility rather than adherence to a single, standardised model. Mentors reported adopting different approaches depending on the mentee's needs, disciplinary context, and relational dynamics. This adaptability reflects the absence of a formal mentoring framework but also demonstrates mentors' efforts to respond meaningfully to diverse developmental requirements.

Viewed through the lens of the Cup Framework (Shore, 2017), this flexibility can be interpreted as an attempt to align mentoring content with mentees' varying levels of readiness and capacity. However, the lack of institutional coordination means that such alignment remains uneven and largely dependent on individual initiative. This finding supports scholarship advocating structured mentoring systems that balance flexibility with clear guidance and institutional support (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015; Hobson & Taylor, 2020).

Institutional and Contextual Constraints on Effective Mentorship

Despite widespread recognition of mentorship's value, the findings highlight significant structural barriers that limit its effectiveness at NUL. Heavy teaching loads, administrative responsibilities, and competing institutional demands restrict the time and energy available for mentoring. The absence of formal guidelines, training, and recognition further undermines consistency and sustainability.

These constraints directly affect the "context" component of the Cup Framework, reducing mentors' ability to effectively expand mentees' capacity. Without institutional mechanisms to protect mentoring time or acknowledge mentoring labour, mentoring remains informal, uneven, and dependent on individual initiative. This finding is supported by previous research in higher education, which identifies workload pressures and weak institutional support as key impediments to effective mentoring (Qureshi & Unlu, 2025; Goh & Richardson, 2024).

Alignment and Tensions Between Mentor and Mentee Expectations

While mentors and mentees shared a common understanding of the importance of mentorship, the findings reveal subtle tensions in expectations. Mentees expressed a strong desire for structured, research-focused, and career-oriented mentoring, whereas mentors often emphasised commitment, self-direction, and professional seriousness in mentees. These differing emphases highlight the need for clearer articulation of roles, goals, and responsibilities within mentoring relationships.

The findings suggest that formalised mentoring structures could help bridge these expectation gaps by clarifying objectives, establishing shared benchmarks, and supporting mutual accountability. Such alignment is essential to ensure that mentoring interactions effectively expand the capacity of mentees and foster sustainable academic development.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that mentorship at NUL is widely regarded as an essential pillar of academic and professional development for both junior and senior staff. Senior academics conceptualise mentoring as a reciprocal, evolving relationship through which they share knowledge, skills, and professional insights while simultaneously enhancing their leadership capacities, interpersonal competencies, and scholarly networks. Junior academics likewise value mentorship as a critical support mechanism that clarifies career pathways, builds confidence, strengthens academic skills, and opens doors to collaborative and professional opportunities. This mutual recognition underscores mentorship's centrality to academic growth and institutional cohesion.

However, despite these clear benefits, several structural and contextual challenges continue to limit the effectiveness of mentorship at NUL. Heavy workloads, competing responsibilities, and limited time were consistently noted as constraints that hinder meaningful engagement. The absence of formalised mentorship structures resulted in inconsistency and uneven access across departments. In addition, variable levels of motivation among both mentors and mentees further impacted the quality and sustainability of mentoring relationships. These challenges reflect broader trends in higher education, where institutional pressures, informal processes, and a lack of coordinated support often constrain effective mentorship.

The study highlights an urgent need for NUL to implement structured, well-supported mentorship programmes that provide clarity about roles, targeted mentor training, and institutional recognition mechanisms. Such frameworks would strengthen accountability, enhance consistency, and promote active participation. More importantly, they would contribute to a more equitable and supportive mentoring culture that benefits all academic staff. Based on the findings, a hybrid mentorship model is recommended for NUL. This model should combine formal senior–junior mentoring with structured peer mentoring and research-focused initiatives. Formal mentoring would ensure consistency and equitable access across departments, while peer mentoring would reduce hierarchical barriers and foster collaborative learning. Research-oriented mentorship programmes focusing on academic writing, publication strategies, grant applications, and supervision skills would directly address the needs expressed by junior academics. Institutional recognition of mentoring through workload allocation, performance appraisal, and promotion criteria would further strengthen participation and sustainability.

In conclusion, mentorship holds substantial potential to advance academic excellence, professional development, and institutional capacity at NUL. Addressing the structural barriers identified in this study and adopting a formalised, robust mentorship framework would ensure that mentorship continues to serve as a transformative tool for junior academics while reinforcing the expertise, leadership, and scholarly legacy of senior staff. Mentorship should be understood not as an optional activity but as a foundational structural component of higher education institutions. When practised intentionally and supported institutionally, mentorship strengthens academic culture, fosters belonging and well-being, encourages collaboration, and creates a dynamic work environment. Strengthening mentorship at NUL would therefore not only enhance individual academic careers but also contribute meaningfully to the university's long-term development, resilience, and sustainability.

This study is subject to certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted as a single-institution case study at the National University of Lesotho, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other higher education contexts. Second, purposive sampling was used to select participants with mentoring experience. While this enhanced the data's relevance, it may have excluded perspectives from staff who were less engaged in mentoring activities. Finally, data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire rather than interviews, which may have constrained opportunities for probing and follow-up clarification. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable contextual insights into mentoring practices within a resource-constrained higher education environment.

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