

Exploring Key Factors in Mentoring Relationships in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing mentoring relationships in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) from both mentors' and mentees' perspectives. Using a qualitative single case study, data were collected from 12 participants—six experienced mentors and six new academic staff—through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: informal mentorship dynamics, emotional bonding, affective encouragement, and an integrated collegial environment. Findings highlight the crucial role of emotional bonding, particularly in same-gender informal mentoring, in fostering effective relationships. Additionally, mentor-mentee matching, gender roles, and local cultural norms significantly shape mentorship experiences. The study underscores the need for mentorship programs that incorporate inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and open dialogue to ensure meaningful interactions. By strengthening emotional reinforcement and collegial ties, Malaysian HEIs can enhance mentoring programs, facilitating the professional development and acclimation of new academic staff. Grounded in attachment theory, this research provides valuable insights into fostering positive mentoring relationships, offering guidance for structured, culturally attuned programs that support long-term career success.

Keywords: Mentoring Relationships, Mentors, New Academic Staff, Emotional Bonding, Higher Education

Introduction

In recent years, mentoring relationships have gained increasing attention for their role in supporting the professional development of new academic staff in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) (Kamarudin et al., 2023). New academics face challenges such as navigating institutional policies, balancing teaching and research, establishing research agendas, and engaging students effectively (Ismail et al., 2022). Mentoring programs provide structured guidance and knowledge transfer, helping mentees overcome these challenges and advance their careers (Ragins & Verbos, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). Given the mutual benefits of mentoring, further research is needed to explore factors affecting its effectiveness. As Malaysia's higher education sector undergoes rapid transformation,

effective mentoring is crucial (Asmawi & Jaladi, 2018; Ismail et al., 2022; Mohammadi & Karupiah, 2020; Mok, 2015).

To meet the standards set by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), HEIs must implement mentoring programs that support new academic staff across seven key roles, including teaching, research, consultancy, and administration (MQA, 2014). Mentoring relationships significantly enhance teaching, research, and career progression (Lunsford et al., 2017). Irby et al. (2017) emphasized that new academics require guidance in establishing these relationships, yet mentors' and mentees' perspectives and the overall effectiveness of mentoring in addressing new academics' needs remain underexplored. This study examines these perspectives, the factors influencing mentoring relationships, and strategies to optimize mentorship for professional development in Malaysian HEIs. Findings will contribute to scholarly discourse and provide practical recommendations for improving mentoring programs.

Research Question

This study explores the following questions:

1. What factors shape mentoring relationships between mentors and new academic staff?
2. How do these factors impact the professional and personal development of new academic staff?

Attachment Theory in Mentoring

Attachment theory, pioneered by Bowlby (1979), explores early social bonds and their lasting impact on development. In academia, it helps explain how new academic staff form and maintain mentoring relationships within HEIs (Wang et al., 2017). These relationships provide guidance, support, and professional identity development. Mentors act as secure bases, helping mentees navigate academic challenges. According to attachment theory, mentoring relationships progress through four phases: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition (Yip et al., 2018). Understanding these phases enhances insight into both formal and informal mentorship dynamics. Examining mentoring through this lens reveals the emotional bonds and interactions that shape effective mentorship. Attachment theory aligns with qualitative research by exploring complex human relationships. Applying it allows systematic investigation of mentor-mentee bonds, their evolution, and their impact on professional development. This perspective helps HEIs foster better support systems for academic staff, enhancing both mentorship effectiveness and faculty well-being.

Literature Review

Mentoring relationships are essential for academic staff development in HEIs, guiding new faculty through teaching, research, and administrative roles (Carmel & Paul, 2015; Boswell et al., 2015). These relationships enhance skill development, career satisfaction, and a sense of belonging, contributing to long-term success (Lunsford et al., 2018; Sherif et al., 2020). However, research largely focuses on mentees, leaving mentors' perspectives underexplored (Schriever & Grainger, 2019). In Malaysian HEIs, new academic staff faces challenges such as adapting to teaching methods, research expectations, and departmental cultures (Kamarudin et al., 2023; Asmawi & Jaladin, 2018). The pressures of publication and research funding add further stress (Mohammadi & Karupiah, 2020; Ismail et al., 2022). Institutional and cultural factors complicate work-life balance, making strong mentoring programs essential

(Vikaraman et al., 2017). Yet, little research examines how mentoring alleviates these pressures.

Mentoring occurs formally and informally, each with distinct characteristics (Janssen et al., 2016). Formal programs structure mentoring, while informal relationships develop naturally (Holt et al., 2016). Trust, communication, and shared goals define successful mentorship (Hudson, 2016; Barrett et al., 2017), but the literature lacks detailed comparisons of formal and informal outcomes. Attachment theory highlights trust and security as key mentoring elements (Yip et al., 2018; Wang, 2017), yet research rarely explores how relationships evolve (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2020; Wang et al., 2017). Mentor-mentee matching significantly affects mentoring success (Menges, 2016). Matches based on shared interests and complementary skills are ideal, yet data gaps hinder effective pairing (Sorkness et al., 2017). Research on compatibility in Malaysian HEIs is scarce, despite its impact on mentoring success (Ossorno et al., 2021). Gender dynamics in mentoring, particularly cross-gender versus same-gender relationships, have gained attention. Both can benefit mentees if communication barriers are addressed (Ragins & Kram, 2007; Kao et al., 2014). However, studies on gender and mentoring within Malaysia's cultural context are limited, necessitating further exploration (Ismail et al., 2011). Given culturally embedded gender roles, more research is needed on their influence on mentoring effectiveness.

While literature offers insights into mentoring in HEIs, several aspects require further examination. More research is needed to understand mentors' perspectives, compare the effectiveness of formal and informal mentoring, and explore mentor-mentee matching mechanisms in greater depth. Additionally, studies on gender dynamics in Malaysian HEIs and longitudinal analyses tracking mentor-mentee relationships over time would provide valuable insights. Expanding research in these areas will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of mentoring relationships and their impact on academic staff development.

Methodology

This study examines mentoring relationships at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) using a qualitative single-case study approach. Documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews were employed to explore participants' perceptions. A case study approach helps describe and understand a phenomenon (Ledford & Gast, 2018) and can take various forms, including exploratory and explanatory studies (Adu & Miles, 2023). Single case studies provide in-depth insights into phenomena (Siggelkow, 2007), while qualitative thematic analysis aids in identifying and interpreting key themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This method ensures data triangulation, capturing the complexity of mentoring relationships and their impact on academic staff development.

Participants

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) was purposefully selected for this study due to its status as a leading research university in Malaysia, known for fostering academic innovation and professional development. UTM's structured mentoring initiatives, including the UTMLead M4E Mentoring Program and the Mentor-Mentee Programme UTM Gold, integrate both formal and informal mentoring, providing an ideal setting to examine mentoring dynamics. The university's commitment to faculty development and its diverse academic community further enhances its relevance as a case study, offering insights applicable to similar

institutions. Participants were recruited through official university channels, including departmental directories and academic networks. Initial invitations were sent via email, followed by WhatsApp for confirmation. Mentors, with a minimum of five years of experience, were identified with department heads' recommendations.

New academic staff, including lecturers and researchers with up to three years of experience, were recruited through human resources records and departmental listings. Participants were also encouraged to recommend peers, ensuring a diverse sample across disciplines and backgrounds. Ethical measures, such as pseudonymization and strict data protection, were followed throughout the study. Following Patton's (2014) guidance on participant justification, this study prioritized depth over breadth within the available timeframe. Creswell (2015) noted that qualitative research benefits from smaller, manageable sample sizes, typically ranging from 1-2 to 30-40 participants. Data collection continued until saturation when no new insights emerged was reached (Saunders et al., 2018). Based on qualitative sampling recommendations and saturation criteria (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the study included six mentors and six new faculty staff. A total of 12 in-depth interviews, each lasting 45-60 minutes, were conducted between January and March 2024.

Data Collection Process

To develop the interview protocol, researchers conducted a thorough literature review on the experiences of new academic staff in HEIs. Key themes and concepts were identified, leading to a preliminary set of 10 interview questions focused on participants' roles, challenges, and needs. Three higher education experts reviewed these questions, providing feedback on relevance and clarity. The Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework was applied, ensuring iterative testing and refinement for a well-structured protocol. Interviews with mentors and new academic staff were scheduled based on availability and conducted face-to-face or online. Each session included an introduction explaining the study's purpose, informed consent, and structured questioning. Data saturation was reached when no new insights emerged. Mentors discussed their guidance strategies, while mentees reflected on mentoring's impact on their growth. Audio recordings and notes captured both verbal and non-verbal cues, with pseudonyms used for confidentiality. Participants could provide additional comments before concluding. Member checking allowed them to review and clarify transcripts, ensuring data accuracy and enhancing credibility.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis phase, researchers transcribed the interviews verbatim and created summary reports for each participant. Triangulation was used to ensure the validity of the data, with researchers comparing the interview data against relevant literature and conducting member checking. Participants reviewed their summaries and confirmed their accuracy by signing the reports. The data analysis involved several steps. First, researchers reviewed the collected data to identify preliminary codes. These codes were then grouped into themes, which were refined through further analysis. Organizing the data into themes provided a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

Findings

The analysis identified four key themes through iterative coding and refinement, capturing participants' perspectives on mentoring in higher education: (1) Informal mentorship

dynamics, (2) Emotional bonding, (3) Affective encouragement, and (4) Integrated collegial environment (Table 1).

Table 1

Overview of the Main Themes

Research Questions	Themes	Description
1. What factors shape mentoring relationships between mentors and new academic staff?	1: Informal mentorship dynamics	Offering flexibility, personalized guidance, and stronger personal connections for open communication and tailored support to more effective mentoring experiences
	2: Emotional bonding	A deep and meaningful interpersonal connection between a mentor and a mentee is characterized by mutual trust, respect, and emotional support.
2. How do these factors impact the professional and personal development of new academic staff?	3: Affective encouragement	Vital sources of emotional support, fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among new academic staff.
	4: Integrated collegial environment	A secure and nurturing environment to cultivate strong relationships among faculty members and promote a sense of community through opportunities for collaboration and the exchange of experiences.

Theme 1: Informal Mentorship Dynamics

In examining the factors that shape mentoring relationships, one key theme that emerged is the role of informal mentorship. Unlike structured, institutionalized programs, informal mentoring thrives on spontaneity, authenticity, and genuine connections. While formal programs provide a framework, informal relationships often play an equally if not more impactful role in knowledge sharing, personal growth, and professional development.

Without rigid structures or official titles, informal mentoring fosters trust, mutual respect, and camaraderie. One mentor described it as *“more than just fulfilling a role it’s about forming meaningful relationships based on shared experiences.”* A new academic staff member echoed this sentiment, saying, *“I’ve found informal mentoring incredibly valuable. Conversations flow naturally, and insights are shared in a way that feels organic rather than forced.”*

Informal mentoring also offers flexibility, allowing mentors to provide personalized guidance tailored to individual needs. Another mentor noted, *“I’m there whenever my mentees need advice or just someone to listen it’s about being available beyond structured sessions.”* Similarly, a new academic staff member appreciated the accessibility, saying, *“Knowing I can reach out anytime, whether for career advice or just to talk, makes me feel supported.”*

These relationships often develop naturally over time, built on shared interests and mutual respect. A mentor reflected, *“Some of my most meaningful mentoring relationships started informally. Seeing mentees grow and succeed through our connection is incredibly rewarding.”* A new academic staff member added, *“Informal mentoring feels more impactful*

than formal programs because it's rooted in genuine relationships, not assigned roles." Ultimately, informal mentorship provides a personalized, adaptable approach that fosters authentic relationships and mutual trust. Creating a supportive environment significantly contributes to the success and well-being of new academic staff in higher education.

Theme 2: Emotional Bonding

In examining factors that shape mentoring relationships, emotional bonding emerged as a key theme. This refers to the close, supportive relationships that extend beyond formal mentorship roles, fostering trust, empathy, and collaboration between mentors and mentees. The findings highlight that strong personal connections enhance both professional growth and personal well-being.

Friendship in mentoring relationships develops organically, creating a nurturing environment. As one mentor explained, *"Mentoring is more than just guidance it's about forming genuine connections based on trust and shared experiences."* A new academic staff member echoed this, saying, *"Having a mentor who also feels like a friend has been invaluable. It's reassuring to know I have someone to rely on for both professional advice and personal support."*

Emotional bonding fosters a sense of camaraderie and belonging. Another mentor shared, *"Building a friendship with my mentees allows me to support them not just in their careers but also emotionally. It's about being there for them through challenges and successes."* Similarly, a new academic staff member reflected, *"My mentor's belief in me has been crucial to my growth, giving me the confidence to navigate my academic journey."*

These connections create an inclusive environment where ideas are shared, collaborations flourish, and achievements are celebrated. A mentor noted, *"Friendship breaks down hierarchical barriers and builds a culture of support and respect."* A new academic staff member added, *"Mentoring relationships that include friendship have made me feel more connected and engaged in my work."*

Additionally, gender considerations influence mentoring relationships, particularly within cultural and religious contexts. As one mentor explained, *"Gender matters because, as Muslims, we have restrictions with different genders. It's easier for me to meet with a female mentee anytime, even in the evenings or on holidays."* Overall, emotional bonding strengthens mentoring relationships by fostering trust, empathy, and mutual respect. These friendships contribute significantly to the success and well-being of new academic staff in higher education.

Theme 3: Affective Encouragement

In examining how informal mentorship and emotional bonding influence the development of new academic staff, effective encouragement emerged as a key theme. This refers to the empathy, understanding, and motivation mentors provide, creating a supportive environment that fosters both personal and professional growth.

Mentors not only offer guidance but also reassurance and emotional support, helping mentees build confidence. As one mentor shared, *"Encouragement is essential, especially for new academic staff who may feel uncertain. Our role is to provide reassurance and help them*

navigate the challenges of academia.” A new academic staff member echoed this sentiment: “Having a mentor who encourages and supports me has been incredibly valuable. It makes me feel more confident and capable in my role.”

Beyond career advice, effective encouragement addresses mentees’ concerns, strengthening trust and rapport. A mentor explained, *“When mentees feel comfortable opening up, we can offer guidance tailored to their specific challenges. Creating a safe space for them to express their struggles allows them to grow.”* Similarly, a new academic staff member reflected, *“My mentor’s support has been crucial, especially in moments of self-doubt. Knowing someone believes in me has made all the difference in my transition to academia.”*

Encouragement also extends beyond individual mentoring relationships, fostering a culture of support within the academic community. As a mentor noted, *“Mentoring isn’t just about one-on-one interactions; it’s about creating a broader environment where empathy and collaboration thrive.”* A new academic staff member added, *“Being surrounded by supportive mentors and colleagues has given me the confidence to embrace new opportunities and pursue my goals.”* Overall, effective encouragement plays a vital role in mentoring relationships, providing mentees with the confidence and guidance they need to navigate academia and achieve their professional aspirations.

Theme 4: Integrated Collegial Environment

As the analysis progressed, an integrated collegial environment emerged as a key theme. This refers to an academic culture that fosters collaboration, inclusivity, and mutual respect, creating a supportive space for new academic staff to grow. Both mentors and mentees valued the sense of safety and inclusivity within mentorship circles, where mentees felt encouraged to share their experiences and seek guidance without fear of judgment.

Mentors play a crucial role in nurturing this environment, ensuring mentees feel valued and supported. One mentee shared, *“Having a mentor who fosters a collegial environment has been instrumental in my professional growth. Knowing someone believes in me gives me the confidence to take on new challenges.”* Another added, *“When mentees feel respected and supported, they are more empowered to contribute meaningfully to the academic community.”*

Beyond individual mentoring relationships, institutional policies that prioritize mentorship and collaboration also shape this environment. A mentor noted, *“We need policies that promote mentoring programs and professional development resources. A strong academic culture ensures everyone has the opportunity to succeed.”* A new academic staff member reflected, *“The collegial environment within our institution has been fundamental to my growth. From mentoring programs to interdisciplinary collaborations, there are so many opportunities to learn and connect with colleagues.”*

Informal networks and communities of practice further strengthen this culture, providing additional support and learning opportunities. A mentor observed, *“Informal networks allow mentees to connect with like-minded peers, enhancing mentorship and professional development.”* A mentee echoed this sentiment, saying, *“Being part of informal communities has enriched my experience. It’s given me a chance to engage with colleagues beyond my*

department and gain new perspectives.” A well-integrated collegial environment is essential for fostering strong mentoring relationships and promoting the professional development of new academic staff. By creating a culture where mentees feel valued and empowered, institutions can enhance the growth and success of their academic community.

Discussion and Implications

The first research question investigates factors shaping mentoring relationships between mentors and new academic staff in Malaysian HEIs. Literature suggests that mentors view mentoring as an opportunity to impart wisdom and support professional growth, while mentees appreciate the guidance and learning opportunities (Wang et al., 2017). This study highlights four key aspects.

First, informal support plays a crucial role alongside formal mentoring programs. Emotional bonding and affective encouragement foster personal and professional development. Mentors often serve as trusted confidants, providing a supportive environment for mentees to express concerns and navigate challenges. Blake-Beard (2007) notes that informal mentoring relationships form based on similarity and attraction, leading to stronger commitment. This aligns with attachment theory, which posits that an affectional bond signifies a successful mentoring relationship, offering psychosocial benefits akin to friendship (Wang et al., 2017). The study's findings further confirm Turban and Lee's (2007) assertion that emotional stability is a shared trait in all mentoring phases.

Second, most mentor-mentee matches are assigned administratively, ensuring alignment with institutional goals. However, formal pairings may lack social attraction, limiting engagement (Turban & Lee, 2007). Alternative approaches, such as choice-based and assessment-based matching, can improve mentor-mentee compatibility. Effective matching is critical for establishing robust mentoring frameworks (Blake-Beard, 2007). In the initiation phase, dispositional attachment styles shape expectations, with secure attachment fostering better engagement (Wang et al., 2017). Thus, administrators should evaluate different matching strategies to enhance mentoring effectiveness.

Third, gender considerations significantly influence mentoring relationships, particularly within cultural and religious contexts. Understanding these dynamics fosters inclusivity and effectiveness (Li et al., 2018). Same-gender mentorship remains preferred in Malaysia, given cultural norms (Taylor, 2019), necessitating greater awareness and research on gender-related mentoring issues (Ragins & Kram, 2007). While cross-gender mentoring is gaining recognition, HEIs should ensure culturally sensitive mentoring programs that balance formal and informal mentorship opportunities.

Fourth, fostering an integrated collegial environment is essential. In the cultivation phase, mentoring relationships transition to frequent engagement and deeper emotional connections (Wang et al., 2017). HEIs must recognize mentors' instrumental role in shaping new staff experiences and provide necessary resources. Future research should explore mentorship's long-term impact on professional growth and well-being, informing evidence-based mentoring program designs. Findings demonstrate that mentoring relationships encompass mentor-mentee matching, gender considerations, informal mentoring, and institutional support, aligning with relational mentoring principles (Early, 2020). Unlike

hierarchical traditional mentoring, relational mentoring fosters mutual growth and development.

The second research question explores how these factors impact new academic staff's professional and personal development, highlighting four aspects: First, open communication channels are essential for emotional support and resilience. Regular dialogue fosters transparency, enabling mentees to articulate goals and challenges while receiving tailored guidance (Aylor et al., 2016). Second, personalized mentoring addresses individual aspirations. Mentors should tailor guidance to each mentee's strengths and career trajectory, empowering them to navigate academia effectively (Li et al., 2018). Third, shared academic and professional experiences strengthen mentoring relationships. Joint projects and professional development activities facilitate continuous learning and collaboration (Masalimova et al., 2016). Fourth, mutual contributions enhance mentorship. In short, mentees should contribute unique perspectives while learning from mentors' expertise, fostering reciprocal knowledge exchange (Janssen et al., 2016). Mentoring relationships significantly enhance new academic staff's professional development. By fostering communication, personalized guidance, shared experiences, and reciprocal learning, HEIs can implement comprehensive mentoring programs that support career advancement and institutional success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of mentoring in supporting the professional development of new academic staff in Malaysian HEIs, with UTM as a case study. The findings highlight the interplay between professional growth and emotional support, emphasizing the need for open communication, shared experiences, and culturally responsive mentoring. By acknowledging socio-cultural factors such as gender roles, local norms, and religious practices, HEIs can foster meaningful mentor-mentee relationships. Emotional reinforcement and collegial bonds further enhance the mentoring experience, helping new staff acclimate and thrive. Integrating attachment theory into mentoring research provides valuable insights into fostering supportive, lasting relationships. Ultimately, comprehensive and culturally attuned mentoring programs can cultivate a collaborative academic community rooted in knowledge-sharing, mutual support, and excellence.

A key limitation of this study is its focus on a single institution (UTM), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Expanding research to multiple institutions and including perspectives from senior faculty, administrators, and program coordinators would enhance the study's applicability. Future research could also explore the long-term impact of mentoring, conduct comparative studies across different university types, and examine cultural influences on mentoring relationships. Additionally, investigating technology-driven mentoring approaches, such as e-mentoring, could offer new strategies for supporting academic staff in remote or hybrid environments.

This study bridges attachment theory with mentoring practices in Malaysian HEIs, emphasizing emotional bonding and trust as critical drivers of mentorship effectiveness. Theoretically, it extends attachment theory's relevance to adult professional development, reframing mentorship as a relational continuum shaped by affective reciprocity, rather than a transactional process. This challenges hierarchical mentoring paradigms and highlights

informal dynamics as key to sustaining relationships. Contextually, the research addresses Malaysia's unique cultural and institutional landscape. By revealing how gender roles and collectivist norms influence mentorship such as the preference for same-gender informal guidance it provides actionable insights for designing culturally attuned programs. The findings align institutional goals (e.g., MQA standards) with grassroots needs, advocating for mentorship models that blend formal structures with emotional reinforcement. For UTM and similar institutions, this offers a roadmap to enhance faculty retention, inclusivity, and global competitiveness, directly supporting Malaysia's Higher Education Blueprint. Globally, it underscores cultural sensitivity as vital for adapting mentorship frameworks to non-Western contexts.

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