EXPLORING MENTORING AS A TOOL FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF ACADEMICS IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

Mentoring refers to a dyadic relationship between a more experienced member of an organization with a less experienced individual. Mentoring provides support as a mentor acts as a role model. Mentoring is important for organizational development as it implies workplace learning and leadership principles in career advancement. The functions of a mentor are to teach, coach, support and guide a protégé, to progress in his/her career. This article theoretically explores the roles of mentoring in career advancement of academics in private higher education institutions.

Keywords: Academic, Career Advancement, Mentoring, and Private Higher Education Institutions

The academic profession has been described by Perkin (1969) as the most important profession of the twentieth century. He argues that by the end of that century, the world is increasingly dominated by professional experts. Thus, university lecturers have become the educators and counselors of other professions. In this view, it is universities, through their academic staff, which provide the expansion of new knowledge, the leading shoots of intellectual culture, and the institutionalisation of innovation in arts, sciences and technology. The view perceives academics as the repository of current knowledge, disseminators of knowledge and creators of new knowledge, as well as being critics of conventional academic and epistemological wisdom.

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However, as professionals themselves, academics have their own disciplinary, occupational and material interests in relation to the institutions of learning in which they teach, research and work. These interests include freedom to teach and study their academic subjects without political or external interference; the right to share in making decisions in relation to the curriculum and research agenda; the right to participate in determining the conditions of life and work in the institutions where they are employed; security of tenure; and satisfactory terms and conditions of career.

This paper aims to explore the constructs of mentoring and its roles for career advancement of academics. Numerous studies have been carried out to examine career advancement of academics in Malaysia (Leong and Sohail, 2003; Sohail, Jegatheesan and Nor Azlin, 2002; Maimunah and Roziah, 2006). However, none of them have focused on the role of mentoring for career advancement of academics particularly in the Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). This study aims to fill the gap in knowledge by focusing on the role of mentoring in the career advancements of academics in Malaysian PHEIs.

This study is based on literature reviews of past research conducted on mentoring and its relation to career advancement. This article is divided into several sections. First, it starts with an overview of PHEIs in Malaysia, followed by reviews on the meaning of mentoring and career advancement, types of mentoring and roles as well as outcomes of mentoring to career advancement. The article then briefly concludes and suggests the significance of mentoring on career advancement of academics in PHEIs.

Background of Private Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia

A market sensitive educational system has been evolving in Malaysia. Traditionally, public universities were responsible for providing undergraduate and post graduate studies. However, the demand for university places has outstripped the availability for more places within the public university system and further considering other avenues to increase the number of admission for tertiary education. Hence, a policy has been made to allow for the development of PHEIs.

While private institutions have been in existence in Malaysia for the last twenty years, the government has been actively supporting them since 1995 to develop their own unique and innovative education career path. This has been necessitated due to the structural transformation of the economy, and the emphasis of the educational policy, which has been directed towards building a pool of well-educated and skilled professionals (Sohail, Jegatheesan and Nor Azlin, 2002).

Since the Asian economic crisis in 1997, Malaysia, as well as other countries in the region, has devised innovative ways to improve the qualities of higher education. The strategy pursued for growth and development of education has been to encourage private sectors to meet the needs of tertiary education, resulting in a market sensitive educational system. Private institutions have since been allowed to offer various types of courses. At the level of the bachelors' degree, they may offer courses leading to a degree under an inter-institutional collaborative arrangement with either a local or foreign university. Two major categories of arrangement have been envisaged –the split degree arrangement and the entire degree arrangement. Under the split degree arrangement, a part of the degree is undertaken at the private institutions and the final part of the program is completed at the foreign university. Twinning programs, credit transfer and advanced standing programs are the modes of completion of the degree. The major arrangements, which allow for the entire degree to be completed at the private college, are the 3+0 foreign degree franchised program, external program, and the distance learning program (Sohail and Saeed, 2001).

With a focus on the development of PHEIs, there were nine private universities, two virtual universities and branch campuses of four foreign universities, as until 2006. While the private universities have been vested with the right to award their own degrees at all levels, the foreign universities award identical degree programs as the host university. This will obviously mean that the number of academic staff must have increased. Figure 1 displays the total number of academic staff according to their qualification from the year 2001 until 2005. These data show that huge demand for academics and proposition of PhD holders are relatively smaller than other qualifications.

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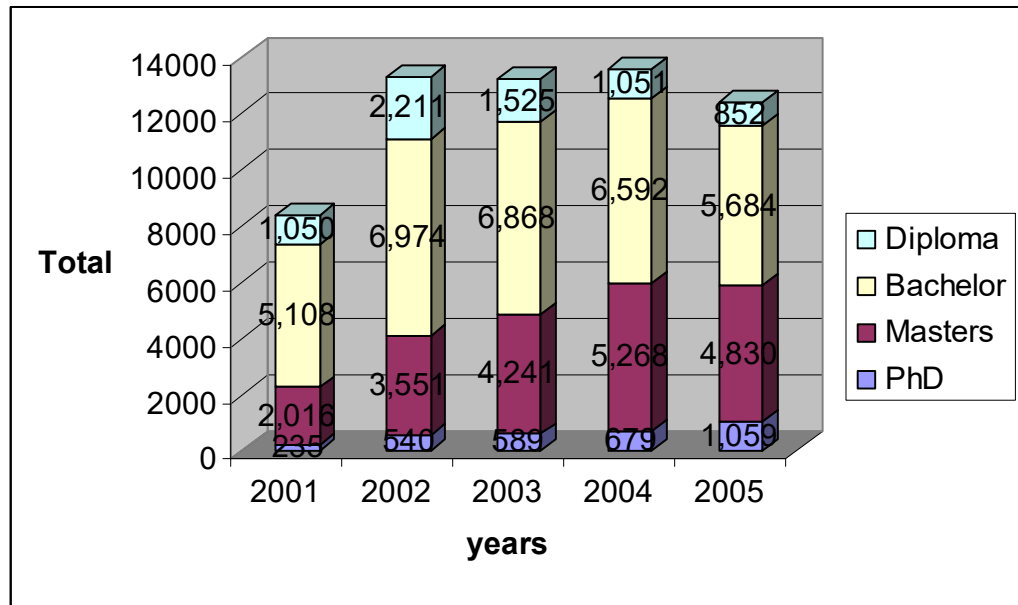
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Figure 1: Number of Academics in Private Higher Education Institutions (2001-2005).
Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2005

The Malaysian government has linked economic development with education and envisioned that the country will be a regional educational hub. To this end, the government has established the National Accreditation Board (LAN) to regulate activities related to all aspects of education such as infrastructure, curriculum and human resources to increase the efficiency and standardized education, particularly in the private higher institutions (LAN, 1998). The implication for academics will be a drive towards gaining competitive advantage over others by upgrading academic qualifications and to establish a culture of teaching, research and services. Evaluation of individual academics will take into account a service mix in the quest for high academic standards (Ismail and Murtedza, 1996).

The PHEIs owned by profit-driven enterprise have created a positive impact on the education industry. However, profit driven providers of education have posed a number of problems related to developing academic staff in the higher level. Problems include the lack of training and development and an appropriate qualification level. Some private higher educational institutions hire staff with low level of qualification

and less experience, and some are foreigners who face uncertainties in terms of residential matters. The Ministry of Higher Education was taking steps to curb the rampant and blatant abuse of students' visas, where some foreign students used students' visas as a means to gain employment while registered with unlicensed higher educational institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2005).

Career research continues to thrive. Majority of the researches in recent years have focused on the changes in traditional career and uncertainty environment. Education professionals are now looking at meeting the demands of operating in a global arena. Indeed, Altbach (1996) commented that as the world has become increasingly interdependent and national academic boundaries have been blurred, science and scholarship are becoming increasingly international. Further, contemporary career theory argues for broader understandings to encompass the multi-dimensionality of career including the challenges of internationalizing higher education and the borderless career. One of the challenges in career advancement of academics is the examination on the role of mentoring in materializing the professional development of academics in PHEIs.

Literature review

Mentoring has its origins in Greek mythology with Athens, the Goddess of Wisdom. A man called himself as mentor, Athena, became a substitute parent to Telemachus, and whose father, Odysseus was away during the Trojan War. Athena guided and nurtured the boy who would become the future king of Ithaca. Mentoring is traditionally viewed as an intense relationship between a younger adult and an older, more experienced adult who helps the younger individual learn (Kram, 1985). Hayes (2001) reviewed the mentoring literature across the disciplines of business, nursing, and education and defined mentoring as a process of building trust between two people, one is experienced and the other is a newcomer.

The meaning of mentoring can be viewed from two dimensions. First, mentoring can be understood from a traditional perspective and secondly from a new career context. The significance of putting these perspectives is to show changes in its meaning over time.

Traditional perspective on mentoring

Fagenson (1989) noted that a traditional mentoring relationship is one in which a senior person working in the organisation assists with the career advancement and professional development of a junior. Mentoring studies have provided insights into

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individual-level factors that account for the cultivation of such relationships including locus of control, mentor race and gender role. In addition, the organisation-level factors include organizational culture, organisational structure, diversity, promotion, career satisfaction, and competences. Overall, these traditional concepts of mentoring have focused on a single or primary mentoring relationship.

Originally, a mentor is referred to as an influential individual with advanced experience and knowledge who provide support and mobility to their protégé's careers (Fagenson, 1989; Noe, 1988). Daloz (1986) defined mentors as essentially those who guide and lead others along the journey of their lives. Caffarella (1992) asserted that mentoring involves an intense caring relationship in which persons with more experience work with less experienced persons to promote both professional and personal development (p.38). Anderson (1993) defined mentoring as the process in which an individual has regular dialogue with, and receives advice from a more experienced member of the organisation on a range of issues relating to the individual's job and career development. Ragins and Cotton (1999) noted that mentoring relationship is highly beneficial by providing career development aid and facilitating the protégé's advancement in the organisation. These contribute to the protégé's personal growth and professional development.

Over the years, the importance of having a mentor in career development has received ample attention (Godshalk and Sosik, 2003; Higgins, 2001; Lankau and Scandura, 2002; Scandura and Williams, 2001). For instance, employees with a mentor support gain more promotions, higher incomes and more work satisfaction than employees without a mentor (Baugh and Scandura, 1999; Ragins et al., 2000; Whitney and Coestsier, 1993). However, it is increasingly acknowledged that having a mentoring relationship became important for employees seeking career advancement in both domestic and international management of various employment contexts. Hence, it is argued that mentoring, too, has a great impact on career advancement of academics.

Mentoring in the New Career Context

Career researchers have written extensively about the changes of the environment and the role of mentoring. This led the definition and role of mentoring to change drastically in a new context. The changes can be viewed in four types. The first is employment contract between individuals and their employers. Recently, increasing pressure to respond to competitive conditions, ongoing customer demands, job security, globalisation, and organisational restructuring of work have influenced the career performance of employees. Thus, the roles of mentoring in today's

organisations have changed. Secondly, the changing nature of technology has also affected the forms and functions of individuals' career aspiration and expectation. The rapid pace of change in information technologies has increased the importance of knowledge workers. Today, a worker is keen to learn and adapt to new methods through self-directed learning. Unlikely in those days we need superior to advice, coach and teach the newcomers to the organizations. Third, the changing nature of organisational structures affects sources from which individuals receive developmental assistant. As organisations expand internationally in a variety of structural arrangements such as joint ventures, licensing, outsourcing and virtual business, and employees will need to look beyond intra-organisational sources to others who can provide them with professional assistant. Finally, organisational membership has become increasingly diverse, particularly in terms of race, nationality, and gender, which affect both the needs and resources available for developmental (Kram & Hall, 1996). This certainly has influence on career advancement and development of employees. This brief review of the literature on traditional view of mentoring and new career context suggests particular shifts in the definitions and nature of the mentoring relationships.

Types of Mentoring

The notion of a senior professional promoting the career of a newcomer has shaped the development of mentoring programs. Mentoring programs can be categorised into two types which are formal and informal mentoring relationships. Formal mentoring relationship usually developed through the assignment of members of the relationships by a third party (Murray, 1991). Informal mentors are motivated to enter the relationships by mutual identification and developmental needs. Perhaps formal mentors may enter them to meet organisational expectations. These programs vary in their length and structure such as informal mentoring is unstructured and usually last for many years (Kram, 1985). In contrast, the duration for formal mentoring will be usually shorter e.g. less than a year and in a relationship both parties have signed a contract. These programs resulted in helping the protégés to achieve long term career goals, be more satisfied with current job, become socialized newcomers and provide on-the-job training. Also, other factors that determine mentoring relationships are amount of personal contact between mentor and protégé, influence exerted by mentor, gender and seniority of mentor and protégé, and goals to be achieved. A satisfied mentoring relationship will eventually help towards a better career goal and career advancement among academics.

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The Roles and Outcomes of Mentoring in Career Advancement

Before discussing the roles of mentoring and outcomes of mentoring, it is necessary to briefly explain the meaning of career advancement. Career advancement refers to processes that one undergoes toward changes in performance, job position, promotion, and a better relationship with management in any organisation. According to Apospori, Nikandrou and Panayotopoulou (2006), there are many determinants of career advancement including interpersonal and individual, human capital and family. Interpersonal determinants involve supportive relationships at work, such as mentors and peer network that facilitate advancement. Individual determinants include personality traits and other psychological factors that concern one's capacity for managing such as motivation, career aspiration and gender role orientation. Human capital determinants refer to personal investments in education and experience that enrich employees' value in the job market.

The academic career system has unique features, which has made it a different bureaucratic model of careers and which now makes it a leading indicator of changes in the career system in other sectors (Baruch and Hall, 2004a). However, we can observe that recent boundaryless or protean career models represent a move towards the original view of academics as autonomous professionals (Baruch and Hall, 2004b). According to Altbach (1995), working within universities has changed dramatically, large changes in resource allocation took place, substantial and rapid decline in funding, an ongoing emphasis on more efficiency, and faculty members are increasingly pressured to be productive. So, to minimize work pressure, mentoring can be a good solution that can lead to greater career advancement.

Studies of mentoring in higher education indicated that support and sponsorship contributed to faculty vitality and career success (Henderson & Welch, 1993). In addition, the lack of pre-established mentorship and social network contributed to a maladaptive star in one's academic career (Boice, 1993). William and Blackburn (1998) studied faculty mentoring in eight nursing colleges and found that, mentoring types of role specific teaching, and encouragement were related to protégés research productivity. The notion of mentoring in academic has discussed the outcomes of career advancement, and personal development as an ideal mentoring relationship in academics from both the perspective of the mentor and protégés. Johnsrud (1991) proposed that the establishment of mentoring relationship in keeping with these principles could enhance collaboration across the academic environment, and thus has the potential to contribute to both individual and organisational success.

Social Learning Theory that had been extended by Bandura (1976) argued that cognitive process is firstly involved in the observation, then on the subsequent behaviors. Central to this theory is the separation of observation from the act of

imitation. Bandura's observational learning is characterized by the concept of self-regulation. He contends that people can regulate their own behavior to some extent by visualizing self-generated consequences. Thompson (1990) and St. Clair (1994) further argue that Social Learning Theory represents the theoretical foundations on mentoring in education. This learning theory, which combines elements from both behaviorist and cognitivist orientations, posits that people learn from observing others. The theory contributes to adult learning by highlighting the importance of social context and explicating the process of modeling and mentoring. According Gibson (2002) an early mentoring relationship is crucial to the overall development of the young adult. The author further supported the importance of mentoring in adult development in his longitudinal study of 95 male Harvard graduates. He found that the most successful men had been both protégés of a mentoring relationship and mentors to others as well.

In Eriksson's stages of psychosocial development, mentoring was identified as part of the development stage of "generativist". In middle adulthood, resolving the tensions between generatively and self-absorption allows people to care for others. In this stage, individuals begun to feel a need to provide support and guidance to the next generation (cited in Bee & Bjorklund, 2000). In the best of circumstances, the process of mentoring is mutually beneficial to both mentors and protégés in ways that include personal and career advancement. Mentors often find themselves professionally simulated, personally enriched and perhaps rejuvenated.

Mentoring researchers have begun to recognize that there is variation in the satisfaction level (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). It is critical to understand how the full range of mentoring relationships affects career and job attitudes in the workplace. Protégés with highly satisfying mentors may display positive work attitudes and this situation leads to better performance, but there may be few differences between non-protégés and protégés with marginally satisfying or dissatisfying mentors that lead to poor performance.

A study by Noe (1988) pointed the determinants of successful assigned formal mentoring relationships. This study consists of 43 mentors and 139 protégés engaged in a formal mentoring program designed to promote the personal and career advancement of educators. He found that protégés reported receiving beneficial psychosocial outcomes. He suggested that mentoring relationships provide both career advancement and psychosocial functions. These relationships were characterized by high levels of commitment on the part of both mentors and protégés and were perceived to have a higher impact on the individual's personal development. Noe also noted that the potent influence on the success of mentoring relationships such as individual's level of self-efficacy. The purpose of mentoring is to promote the newcomer's career advancement, personal development and education. The outcomes

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of the mentoring process are accomplished goals, role fulfillment and self-efficacy. Therefore, mentoring is a process that can encourage self-efficacy that enable one to take on a new role successfully and become a fully committed professional.

Mentoring researchers have empirical evidence that support the role of mentoring for career advancement. Many countries have adapted mentoring as a tool for career advancement. In Japan, mentoring relationships have been incorporated into the culture. Japanese culture with enriched values and morale has accepted mentoring relationships as part of the working culture. Mentoring emphasizes high value on continuity, obligation and duty between individual, the notion of respect for elders and the concept of seniors protecting juniors from failure. These indicate that mentoring has been accepted more than a tool in Japan since it is already embedded in their culture.

In the United States, mentoring has been the focus of many researches and discussions over the past decade. Ragins et al.'s (2000) study about the effect of mentoring and career attitudes found that mentoring relationships significantly related with individuals satisfactions and positive attitudes towards workplace. The results of the study are in congruent with Levinson et al.' (1978) theory that mentoring is not simple and it is important for continuous work effectiveness. In Australia, there is a great interest in mentoring. Mentoring programs are implemented in all types of organisations, from manufacturing to banking and finance, government agencies, non-profits such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army and small businesses (MacGregor, 2000). These programs reflect the importance and acceptance of mentoring over many sectors. The important finding from this study is mentoring as learning and development strategy, where an experienced co-worker uses guided learning to assist a less experienced worker in learning new skills and improving work performance. This has created conducive learning environment among senior and junior workers in the organisations.

Outcomes from mentoring relationships can be classified into two broad categories. The first category is objective career outcomes such as promotion and compensation (Dreher & Ash, 1990). The second category consists of subjective career outcomes. This is more affective and less tangible signs of career success such as career satisfaction, career commitment, job satisfaction and turnover intention (Noe, 1988). However, some studies have noted that the correlations between subjective and objective career success are typically low or moderate (Judge, Boudreau, and Bretz, 1994). This shows that career advancement is closely related with subjective outcomes of mentoring relationship.

A critical role of HRD is to support initiatives that foster employee productivity so as to contribute to organisational performance. McDonald and Hite

(1998) identified the role of mentoring as a key HRD initiative and stated that the HRD function might well be considered a natural place for the development of mentoring initiatives due to the role of HRD in fostering career development aligned with the need of the organisation. This role clearly justifies mentoring and career advancement have strong contribution to overall organisation performance.

Conclusion and Implication for Practice

This review clearly indicates that mentoring is an important tool for career advancement among employees including the academics. From the professional perspective, the discussion tries to establish the roles and outcomes of mentoring that eventually leads to positive individual career and organisational outcomes. From a personal perspective, it is reflected upon the relationships one has experienced, both as a mentor and a protégé.

Another implication is about the connection between mentoring relationships and career advancement among academics. Studies have come to a conclusion that there is a strong connection between mentoring and career advancement. Mentoring relationship has led toward a higher satisfaction, trust, self-efficacy, and achievement of career goals. Therefore, these have led to better performance and encouraged individuals for higher commitment to the organisational development.

The study provides insights into definition, types of mentoring program, and roles as well as outcomes of mentoring. These insights could be applied in the context of academia. The discussion also points to the complexity of mentoring. This is due to its multidisciplinary nature that integrates areas such as workplace learning, communication, socialization, motivation, leadership, organizational culture and career advancement. Therefore, mentoring program should be considered in human resource development and management in PHEIs due to the dynamism in their structures, missions and visions in the development of higher education. Based on this theoretical analysis, it is therefore suggested that empirical evidence on the role of mentoring to career development of academics in PHEIs is sought after through research.

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