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Mentoring: A Tool for Professional Development of Academic Staff in Ghanaian Polytechnics

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Abstract:
Ghanaian polytechnics are committed to the development of their current and future academic staff and to providing a supportive structure that encourages and enables them to pursue professional development across the spectrum of their work in the polytechnics. Mentoring, arguably, provides the most personalised, work-relevant and powerful means of implementing this goal. However, there is not a comprehensive mentoring programme in place in Ghanaian polytechnics, resulting in many gaps. Mentoring enables staff to acquire skills needed to progress successfully in their work environments. This paper examined the problem of staff development in Ghanaian polytechnics and argues that this may be corrected by putting in place formal mentoring programmes. This paper offers the management of the polytechnics an insight into the benefits of introducing formal mentoring programmes. The central argument in this paper is that developing staff through mentoring programmes will improve their self confidence and self-esteem as well as uplifting the nation, which has a skills shortage and encourage more young talents to take up a career in academia. The value of this paper is that it would benefit the polytechnics, which find it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff, due to higher salaries being offered in private and other public sectors. To this end, this paper recommends that formal mentoring programmes be introduced for academic staff members.

Key words*: Polytechnic, professional development, formal mentoring programme, career, retention*

1. Introduction

Enhancement of the abilities of polytechnic teachers is a major step in improving the quality of teaching and preparing polytechnic graduates to contribute meaningfully to national development. According to Ladd and Fiske (2008), quality professional development programmes improve the quality of the existing teaching population. Wenglinski (2002) contends that studies have found that professional development can improve teacher quality by changing teacher practices. Arguably, increasing student achievement depends on teachers whose performance in turn, hinges on building their capacity. With regards to economic development, it should be emphasized that the quality of education, as demonstrated by the quality of teaching, facilities and curricula, matters in very important ways (Todaro and Smith, 2012). Kumari (2010) explains that professional development of a teacher implies "his growth in knowledge of his subject, in pedagogy and training techniques, in his love for students and for his institution, in moral and ethical values and growth of his desire to give his best to the world of learning and society". Othman and Dahari (2011) also maintain that continuous professional development for teaching and learning is essential for ensuring continuous quality improvement and professional competence of teachers. In order to impact student learning, Hightower et al. (2011) suggest that professional development must first enhance teacher knowledge and skills and then create improved classroom teaching. This implies that disregarding the professional development needs of polytechnic teachers is, in effect, inimical to the progress of Ghana's polytechnic educational system. That notwithstanding, Nsiah-Gyabaah and Ankomah (2009) contend that one of the major internal challenges faced by Ghanaian polytechnics in meeting demands of the relevant curriculum and quality teaching and learning has been the need for a knowledge and skill update of teachers. They further revealed that the polytechnics find it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff. Nsiah-Gyabaah (2009:49) has also observed that there are substantial inefficiencies and poor quality of delivery and research output among the academic staff in the polytechnics. Again, there is a general perception that a significant number of the Polytechnic teachers are not equipped to deliver quality polytechnic education for a number of interconnected reasons chief among them being

training-related issues, infrastructural limitations and low morale. This state of affairs is seriously undermining the role, importance and contribution of polytechnic education to national development. Many have blamed the problem on the management of the polytechnics, whiles others have blamed it on the government for not doing much in terms of staff development. The authors are however of the opinion that there is no need to apportion blames. It would rather be in the interest of the polytechnics to pay attention to their staff's careers and promote professional growth across the spectrum of their work in the Polytechnics through a sustainable strategy. As noted by Naris and Ukpere (2010), if set goals should be achieved, current staff should be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA), which are required for a tertiary institution. Mentoring, arguably, provides the most personalised, work-relevant and powerful means of implementing this goal. According to Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002), mentoring has been regarded as one of the learning methods used to enhance individuals learning and development in all spheres of life. Developing academic staff through mentoring to possess the necessary sets of academic competencies can therefore have a tremendous impact on the effectiveness and sustainability of polytechnic education in Ghana. However, there is not a comprehensive mentoring programme in place in these polytechnics, with the result that there are many gaps in teaching and learning.

2. Mentoring

Most organisations place much emphasis on mentoring programmes through their training and development efforts as a strategy for building the capacity of their staff. Darwin and Palmer (2009) mentioned that majority of these organisations or institutions have begun to introduce formal mentoring programmes to ensure that employees are equipped with the necessary competencies. According to Othman and Dahari (2011), a mentoring model of professional development entails pairing an experienced and highly successful educator with a less experienced colleague. Moore and Salimbene (1981) as cited in Deakin University Scheme (2010) defined mentoring as an intense, lasting and professionally centred relationship between two individuals in which the more experienced and powerful individual, the mentor, guides, advises, and assists in any number of ways the career of the less experienced, often younger, upwardly mobile protégé. Darwin and Palmer (2009) assert that mentoring, in higher educational institutions, refers to "a process whereby an experienced senior faculty member helps to develop a less experienced junior faculty member". It is a process whereby an experienced senior employee helps to develop a less experienced employee (Noe et al., 2006). The mentoring relationship is between a mentor and a mentee or protégé. Johnsrud (1990) argues that "essentially, mentors enhance the position of the protégé by enabling the development of their skill and competence in a supportive environment". The mentor will advise, guide, teach, inspire, challenge, correct and serves as a role model to another faculty member for that individual's professional development (Megginson et al., 2006). The regular interaction between both allows for the discussion of professional goals, new ideas, and effective strategies that may lead to the improvement of student learning.

3. Types of Mentoring

Dawn and Palmer (2009) mentioned that there are informal and formal mentoring programmes in higher educational institutions. Informal mentoring refers to mentoring that takes place when mentor and mentee meet on an "ad hoc" basis to give each other guidance and advice (Leslie et al., 2005). However, Darwin and Palmer (2009) observed that in today's knowledge economy, the status quo has changed and higher educational institutions are making mentoring more comprehensive and reachable by introducing formal mentoring programmes. This, the authors believe, makes it possible for aspiring academics to receive mentoring support from a number of different people within the institution. Further, it has been observed that formal (assigned) and informal (self-selected) mentoring has both been used for years to help protégé increase their confidence, instil a sense of responsibility, raise awareness of the importance of receiving quality education and generate both a desire and ability to succeed personally and professionally (Centre for Women and Information technology, 2004).

4. Benefits of Mentoring

The Deakin University scheme (2010) opines that the core purpose of academic mentoring in academe is to support the development of academics in the three key aspects of teaching, research and administration. The Document further identified the goals of an academic mentoring scheme to include:

- Offers opportunities for all levels of staff to benefit from a mentoring relationship.
- Assists new academic staff to become familiar with the University culture.
- Supports new and inexperienced academics in the development of their teaching.
- Increases Faculty and School retention.
- Assists academic staff with career development.
- Supports academics in their role as researchers.
- Improves student evaluation of teaching through academic development mentoring.
- Promotes the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning.
- Develops a sense of belonging in an academic community of practice.

The purpose of mentoring in higher educational institutions should be to acquire skills that have been described by Leslie et al. (2005) as "understanding the underlying values, traditions and unwritten behavioural codes of academics; effectively managing a productive career in academics and establishing and maintaining a network of professional colleagues". Within an academic institution, mentoring can also be used to support non-academic staff to settle into their new jobs and to give them feedback on how to improve

their work performance as noted by Bryant and Terborg (2008). Elaborating on the advantages of having formal mentoring, Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002) also identified the following:

- It is an integrated approach for customised development on a broader scale
- It encourages continuous self-managed learning
- It inspires employees to consistently improve their performance and it cost-effective method than sending staff on formal and short-term course.

Megginson et al. (2006) posit that the mentor gets extrinsic benefits such as "enhanced professional recognition when mentees perform well, new knowledge and skills; and leadership development," and for a mentee it provides a great opportunity for networking; career opportunity and advancement; improved knowledge and skills; greater confidence and well being and improve performance and productivity. Furthermore, studies conducted by Garvey and Garrett-Harris (2005) cited in Megginson et al. (2006) concerning benefits from mentorship revealed that the mentee received 40% benefits, the organisation 33% and mentor 27%. This indicates that all the stakeholders will benefit from introducing mentoring programmes. It is against this background that Leslie et al. (2005) suggest that organisations that support individual development should formalize mentoring programmes to ensure fair access to mentoring for all members. This will be beneficial for both the institution and staff members. Mentors should be able to assist the mentees in shaping their careers in a manner that is beneficial to both the organisation and the individual. De Vos et al. (2006) suggest that individuals should take ownership of their careers by planning in a rewarding manner because they are the masters of their own careers and they should utilize opportunities that are offered by the organisation by creating career opportunities through networking and making themselves visible. The authors argue that individuals, who take initiative in planning and developing their careers, have a strategy and become more successful than those who do not. They are likely to benefit more from training and development opportunities, which are offered because they know what they want. Introducing formal mentoring in Ghana's polytechnics will therefore make it possible for aspiring academics to receive mentoring support from a number of different people within the polytechnics.

5. Rationale for Advocating Formal Mentoring Programmes in Ghanaian Polytechnics

Why advocate formal mentoring programme and what is the likely impact on teaching and learning and subsequently, the educational success of polytechnic students in Ghana? Without going into details, the problems within the teaching sector in Ghana are by now quite well known even to cursory observers who have only a passing interest in education. Currently, there is a general perception that a significant number of Ghanaian polytechnic teachers are not equipped to deliver quality polytechnic education for a number of interconnected reasons chief among them being training-related issues (policy, structural and curricular), infrastructural limitations and low morale. Also, a study by Nsiah-Gyabaah and Ankomah (2009) shows that Ghanaian polytechnics find it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff and that there are substantial inefficiencies and poor quality of delivery and research output among the academic staff. Since both the external and internal business environments are constantly changing and organisations compete to attract and retain highly skilled workers, Ghana's polytechnics have no choice than to assume responsibility to plan and manage their employees' careers through an effective professional development strategy. In this regard, Klasen and Clutterbuch (2002) suggest that mentoring can be used as an alternative, rather than sending employees to formal educational programmes and training courses to acquire knowledge and skills required in the workplace, since not all learning is achieved by attending programmes and courses. They further argue that by the efforts of introducing mentoring at the workplace, the mentor will then ensure that employees transfer the skills learned on the job. Odebunmi (2007) is of the opinion that creating of formal mentoring programme would enable mentors to protect and guide both junior and senior academic staff to develop themselves. Against the above background, there is an urgent need to introduce effective formal mentoring programmes for academic staff in Ghanaian polytechnics for the benefit of both the employees and the polytechnics. Successful mentoring enables staff to develop more realistic assessments of their skills and to develop strategies that will establish a career path within the context of their appointment and ambition. Institution of formal mentoring would enable the polytechnics to be committed to the development of their current and future academics and provide a supportive structure that encourages and enables all academic staff to pursue professional development across the spectrum of their work in the Polytechnics. According to the Deakin University Scheme (2010), the mentor is not in a managerial relationship with an individual mentee; instead, mentors offer guidance, support, encouragement and informed feedback to the individuals involved. The presence of formal mentoring programmes in Ghanaian Polytechnics would also motivate academic staff members, especially junior staff. The programmes may be used as a platform at which junior staff members would ask questions, express their concerns to senior staff members and deal with fears and anxieties as they arise in order to improve their work performance. Furthermore, with the introduction of formal mentoring programmes, staff members would have fair access to mentoring. This would increase retention and knowledge creation and sharing amongst staff members in the Polytechnics. As mentioned in the Deakin University Scheme (2010), mentors are also beneficiaries in the mentoring process, by being afforded the opportunity to make contact with new colleagues to share ideas and to reflect on their own skills in research, teaching and administration. Developing effective formal mentoring programmes can also be used to address staff development problems prevalent in these polytechnics, thus reducing over-reliance on external recruitment and lowering recruitment costs. Additionally, it can be used to help staff members to settle in, and to offer them with work performance improvement feedback. This will then encourage young people to join the academic environment and become qualified researchers.

In the light of the above, the suggestion here is that mentoring should be incorporated into the administrative workload of staff members and each department should nominate someone annually who can become a mentor. Mentoring should not only be limited to junior academic staff members, but should also include senior staff that has no former lecturing experience. The objectives, roles and

responsibilities of a mentoring programme should also be made clear to both the mentor and mentee, and they should both agree to it. When setting up a mentoring programme, Brooks (2006) suggests the following:

- An adequate supply of suitable mentors for differing requirements
- High quality mentor training
- A skilled matching process
- Review and evaluation of the programme

The Deakin University Scheme (2010) suggests that an academic mentoring scheme needs to be built on the following principles:

- Focuses more broadly than just on the teaching and learning role of academics.
- Acknowledges the shared responsibility of professional development within higher education.
- Provides opportunities for dissemination of organisational knowledge built over time by a community of practice.
- Emphasises opportunities for reflection and development.
- Be non-evaluative, supportive and confidential.
- Recognises that mentor and mentee are equal partners.
- Recognises diversity of human resources within the organisation.
- Recognises differing needs for different academics at different times.

Building academic mentoring scheme by incorporating the above principles to equip academic staff with the necessary sets of academic competencies can have a tremendous impact on the effectiveness and research output.

6. Conclusion

Though formal mentoring programme for academic staff is not a practice in Ghanaian polytechnics, this paper would argue that mentoring offers the best solution to staff development problem prevalent in the polytechnics based on its far reaching benefits as observed. Investing into mentoring programmes should therefore become a strategic priority for the polytechnics. This is so because having a mentoring programme for academic staff might change the staff equity profile. Such a scheme would support the development of academics in the three key aspects of teaching, research and administration. Additionally, it can reduce the shortcoming experience by the polytechnics in terms of human resource capacity building needed for the achievement of their visions. With better experienced academic staff, Ghanaian polytechnics can become prime centres for academic excellence in Sub-Sahara Africa.

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