

Students' Perspectives on Academic Mentorship Program for Undergraduate Medical Education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Academic mentors are needed to help students start and develop some parts of professional competence that may be hidden in medical education programs and constantly evolving over time. Academic mentorship model research has been developed in the context of medical education in European and North American countries, which have different cultural contexts from Eastern countries. Therefore, students' perspective for the model of valued academic mentorship in this context needs to be explored further to become a recommendation for faculties in providing academic mentorship to students. The study aimed to explore how undergraduate medical students perceive the valuable academic mentoring model.

Methods: This study used qualitative approach. Seventeen medical students of Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW) from year 2018-2021 were divided into 2 focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the findings.

Results: The FGD raised the themes of students' perspectives on valuable academic mentorship if there is a good mentors-students relationship, providing support, hope and role models, flexibility, and effectiveness of academic mentorship, as well as students' hopes for academic mentorship in the future.

Conclusion: Academic mentorship is a guidance that provides hope and support according to student needs. The models of valuable academic mentorship according to students is if there is flexibility in mentoring time and effective communication. Future mentoring models should describe future career opportunities and professionalism as a doctor.

Keywords: academic mentorship, valuable mentoring, medical students

PRACTICE POINTS

- Academic mentorship for medical students is a learning strategy that provides support, and guidance, fulfils student experiences, stimulates, and maintains professional development.
- The role of academic mentors is urgently needed here to create conditions for the students to initiate and develop some parts of professional competence that may be hidden in educational programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic mentoring for medical students is one of the learning strategies to provide support, guidance and career promotion, experience to students, stimulate and maintain professional development.¹ With this student mentoring, students understand the competencies needed by a doctor and other professional roles when they graduate.² Academic mentorship is played by medical faculty lecturers or doctors at teaching hospitals who can encourage professionalism, experience, respect, and empathy for students.³

Undergraduate medical education, personal and professional development that must be achieved includes behaviour, communication skills, obligations in ethics, and social relations.² The role of academic mentors is urgently needed to help students create conditions for the students themselves to initiate and develop some parts of professional competence that may be hidden in medical education programs.²

This academic mentoring plays an important role in medical education, in line with the development of medical knowledge and perspectives that are constantly evolving over time.⁴ In these changing times, medical schools need a way to create a culture of mentoring.⁵ Research on this model of academic mentorship has been developed in the context of medical education in European and North American countries, which have different cultural contexts from Eastern countries.³ Some of the academic mentorship programs that have been offered are group supervision which emphasizes reflection and communication on intra- and interpersonal dilemmas and adjusting the frequency of mentorship to the student load each semester.⁶ Other research suggests the use of peer-mentors for first-year students and career discussions for second-year students and beyond.⁷ Mentorship that is formal, structured and adapts to curriculum content is also expected to improve the quality of mentorship, as is the mentorship material that is programmed at scheduled mentorship times.^{8,9} There was already a broad framework for evaluating the mentorship

in low and middle income countries but still need to emphasize how to foster the success of academic mentorship in medical education.¹⁰ Thus, there is a need to explore how valuable, effective, and efficient academic mentoring models from students' perspectives that can be recommended to faculties to provide supportive mentoring to students in the context of Indonesian learning culture.

METHODS

This study used qualitative approach with a descriptive case study to explore how is the valuable academic mentoring model from the student's point of view by using focus group discussions (FGD). This research was conducted in August 2022. This research had received ethical approval UKDW Medical Faculty Health Research Ethics Committee (Reference no: 1420/C.16/FK/2022).

This study used purposive sampling where the sample selection was based on criteria set by the researcher. There were 17 respondents (8 male and 9 female) with 10 people in the first group (students of 2018 and 2019) and 7 people in the second group (students of 2020 and 2021) with the fulfilment of representation for each student as their study years, gender, and GPA. Researchers ensured that the research sample did not have a conflict of interest (e.g., as a facilitator's mentorship student) during the FGD.

We prepared structured list of question areas covering how students relate to their academic mentors, what is the meaning of academic mentoring in general for students, how academic mentoring can give meaning and value to students, what are the factors that make an academic mentoring valuable, and what is the mentoring model that is valuable from a student's point of view for FGDs. Each discussion group lasted 50-60 minutes. The collected data were recorded in audio-visual form and then transcribed verbatim. FGDs were analysed using thematic analysis. OGP and SNDH each coded the transcripts, discussed to determine the final codes, and categorised them into themes: student-mentor relationship, the meaning of mentorship, valuable mentorship, and model of mentoring.^{4,9,11}

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of FGD transcripts data processing of the two groups could be grouped into 4 themes:

Theme 1: Student-mentor relationship

The first theme was related to the relationship between students and their academic mentors. In the theme of relationship, it was grouped back into several categories: support, availability of discussion room, availability of time, good relations, and communication.

Students state that the mentorship that they had been carrying out so far had been able to provide both academic and personal support to them.

"Because every student need help such as materials. Usually, my mentor not only helps verbally but sometimes also gives materials." (P1.1)

"But in my opinion, the support given by the mentor was more about enthusiasm and very useful tips from me." (P2.1)

The relationship between students and their mentor can help students find strategies by asking clarifying questions, showing their interest, and support students' needs.¹² Formal mentorship that has been carried out so far is indeed challenging to implement because in this mentorship there must be an agreement, being able to explain what the contents of the curriculum are, what responsibilities must be fulfilled, what achievements must be achieved, and the consequences that must be faced by students.¹³ The results of this study are also similar in that it is important for academic mentors to have superior interpersonal skills, so it is very important to choose academic mentors who have strong interpersonal skills and can hone their mentoring style.¹⁴ Support, providing learning strategies, both formally and informally, is needed in the student learning process.

Apart from mentoring which provides support, the time for discussion provided by the mentors was also given special attention by students because it was still lacking due to time constraints and the tension between the mentors and students.

"Usually, the mentorship only lasts about one to two minutes, so in my opinion it was more of a formality, only asking for a signature for OSCE needs" (P1.3)

"He probably didn't have much time; he didn't have enough time for us to vent our complaints like that" (P2.2)

"I really want to discuss with him, I hope he will provide a certain time." (P1.10)

"Because the impression made was tense and we were afraid of her, so it was a little difficult to be open" (P2.6)

As mentors, they should be able to provide themselves, be accessible, allocate their time, and have a deep understanding of the process of medical education where these characteristics are things that must be possessed by mentors, namely selfless and altruistic which are very important.^{12,13} Students want a sense of security from their relationship with their mentor without fear, not affect their academic performance and future opportunities.¹² This can be achieved by academic mentors by positioning themselves as learners so that they can help create non-hierarchical relationships that contribute to creating an atmosphere and sense of security and ultimately create valuable dialogue.¹⁵ The non-hierarchical relationship will foster the 'personal connection' that can be filled with shared interest and goals.⁹ It is an important point here that it is not only the availability of time that students want from their mentors, but a sense of security to tell stories and good non-hierarchical relationships are also important things that students want.

Even so, students stated that the discussion space provided was sufficient.

"On the other hand, my mentor still pays attention to us one by one. For example, during a meeting, he always asked 'what's the problem?' If for example, there was a problem, it's okay to chat privately or private WhatsApp." (P1.4)

The results of the FGD above show that giving a reflective question enables students to identify and develop their personal values, preferences, and perspectives.¹⁶ In each mentoring meeting, planning for the next meeting must be negotiated between

students and their mentors regarding several factors, including but not limited to teaching and learning activities, upcoming exams, study adequacy, personal commitment, and so on.¹⁵ The task of a mentor is to direct by providing specific knowledge and advice to be able to direct student learning activities.¹⁷ By providing reflective questions and specific suggestions, academic mentorship is expected to be able to encourage students to have learning abilities that are able to adapt to the needs of each student.

The good relationship between mentors and students also had an influence on the quality of student mentorship which could affect the depth of mentorship.

"Not all of them had the same approach to their students, some just wanted to get to know each other better or some just want to know in general" (P1.5)

"My friends and I felt a little reluctant, we felt a bit like going to the doctor, like an old doctor like him, so we were a bit reluctant" (P1.3)

"My mentor provided more complete information, and also, if other doctors could be better like that, I didn't hesitate to communicate." (P1.4)

A good relationship between mentors and students is formed through a long longitudinal process. This good relationship should be built on the principle of mutual respect, not friendship, so that the relationship is able to direct student reactions, both positive and negative reactions.¹⁷

By fostering good relations between mentors and students, mentors can identify gaps in student knowledge and skills so that the students being mentored also have a self-improvement cycle.¹⁷ Academic mentoring has an important role in this approach to facilitate the process as a part of student learning.

Theme 2: The meaning of mentorship

The second theme was the meaning in mentoring according to the students which can be grouped into several categories: providing hope, motivation, role model examples, interpersonal relationships, and providing support.

Students emphasized that the meaning of mentorship is that gave good hopes and strengths according to the needs of their students.

"The first criterion was understanding and strengthen what the student's own needs." (P1.9)

"Yes, he always gave us support in the form of prayer or in private chat, he always strengthened us." (P2.2)

Student needs and support that mentors must provide will be meaningful if they come from student reflections themselves so that mentors must be able to hone student reflection skills. Support that is in accordance with the results of student reflections will be useful in helping students to find their own learning approaches, which can then describe the development of their personal learning goals, the selection of learning resources, and how the strategy is to achieve these learning goals.¹⁵ Empowering in academic mentorship is important so that students become more reflective in building self-monitoring of learning and skills so that they become fully potential.¹⁷

Apart from giving hope, the meaning of mentorship was guidance that can motivate students.

"He made his student motivated by his background or maybe by the abilities he had" (P1.5)

"I had a problem with the grades, for the motivation to study, my mentor used to say that in medicine, when you entered medicine, you have to wet your whole body right away, so you can't be bothered." (P1.5)

In academic mentorship, guidance is needed by students to evaluate their performance. By reviewing the achievement of student learning objectives, assisting them in identifying their needs, and how they achieve these needs, will help students to be accountable, which means students are able to improve their self-monitoring abilities.¹⁷ Mentorship is also very important for instilling the concept of a growth mindset, especially for students who have low self-efficacy. This growth mindset will help students create a basic plan for success in learning and implementing strategies for new knowledge.¹⁵

In addition, the meaning of mentoring for students was to provide a role model for the students under their mentorship.

"What I want to make him a role model was his caring nature, not only in the academic field but in the non-academic field, he also really cares about his students." (P1.7)

"Yes, I knew that my time discipline is also not good. From him I learned that being a doctor was disciplined in his time, he was very good in time discipline." (P2.7)

This role model is expected by students because they need confidence that the mentor is able to integrate them into the same interests and encourage them to be competitive in their learning environment, the medical environment.¹³ By integrating into this common interest, a mentor can collaborate co-creatively to solve problems and challenges in the learning process.¹⁸ With role-modelling, there are ways that can be integrated and co-created between lecturers and students. In the future, it is expected to solve their problems in a better and more focused way.

The depth of mentoring according to the student, which was the interpersonal relationship between the mentors and their students comprised the meaning of mentorship because students felt to be lacking.

"Maybe from that point of view the lecturers should know more about how to approach their students. Maybe there are some students who think some things are important to him." (P1.5)

"But if I want to ask personal questions or how to study as a doctor, I'm afraid that he won't open up." (P2.6)

This interpersonal relationship becomes an important attribute in the depth of a mentoring because students will perceive their academic mentor as a trusted source and provider of experiential support that their parents or environment cannot provide.¹² A mentor must be able to build trust and mutual respect so that students have no doubts about asking or expressing their problems.¹⁸ Students want mentorship with open access, quick answers, clear direction, even with multiple mentorships in

a short time, meanwhile, mentors want to balance administrative, clinical and academic in one meeting.¹⁹ This must be balanced so as not to create frustration for students. This becomes a framework in mentoring in addition to the credibility of information and good mentor-student relations.

The last meaning of academic mentorship conveyed by students was a form of support for their students.

"Academic mentors mean that this lecturer helps to teach, educate, and even direct each individual student according to their learning style, according to their abilities and their respective characters." (P1.5)

"The mentors had to try to care. Was there a problem, was there anything I can help with, then on the other hand, the mentor also provided solutions so that it affected our academic grades." (P1.7)

The meaning of academic mentorship where there is a form of support for students can be achieved when the academic mentor places himself as a student. This placement will prevent academic mentors from wanting to make "mini lectures" during mentoring so that later the mentorship will always begin with dialogic questions regarding goal setting, strategic study plans, and self-reflection so that in the end both lecturers and students get a complete context regarding learning strategies.¹⁵ Appropriate self-placement in an academic mentoring also supports students to be able to find the key characteristics of themselves to master adaptive learning processes according to their needs so that students can foster a desire to learn, intrinsic motivation, desire to develop, and resilience.¹⁸

Theme 3: Valuable mentorship

The third theme was related to mentoring that is valuable according to students. These themes could be grouped into flexibility, communication during mentoring, and mentoring topics.

The key to valuable student mentoring could not be separated from the mentor's time flexibility in conducting mentorship.

"The criterion of a valuable academic mentorship was actually from mentorship that doesn't

matter how many minutes it should take, but it's more flexible, just relax how many minutes you (students) want." (P1.4)

Flexibility should be embedded into the mentoring contract at the first meeting. This contract will ensure that there is a mutual understanding of the mentoring goals and expectations of both parties.¹² Flexibility will enable students to build good relationships with their mentors which later indirectly, students will build their knowledge for self-development during their study.¹³ Although flexible, mentoring should be scheduled and have a clear agenda so that the mentorship content remains in line with the goals and outcomes of the mentoring.¹⁸

Communication during academic mentoring also affected the value of an academic mentoring.

"In my opinion, what was valuable is communication between mentors and their students. For example, to know how the progress of learning was, it reviewed, for example, at every meeting, they were asked what it was like, and what their grades were like, whether there was progress or not." (P2.4)

"In my opinion valuable mentoring was when we can have open discussions with the mentors, no one felt shy." (P2.3)

"There was no other way than to actively communicate with students and got to know students personally. The value key was smooth and good communication with students." (P1.4)

An academic mentoring will be valuable if mentors and students can communicate effectively. Effective communication means that the mentor must be able to listen actively and then interpret what the student and mentor have communicated according to what the student intends and not lead to the will of the mentor himself.¹³ Effective communication also means that there is complete and undivided attention, is open without prejudice, encourages reflection, and provides affirmations regarding students' strengths, progress, success, and learning efforts.¹⁸

The topic of mentoring also determines the value of an academic mentoring.

"Maybe the topic that can be discussed not only related to study plan registration, because it was boring. So, maybe the mentor could discuss, what was the difficulty of the block, so if you've entered this block, you'll be more active in studying, and so on" (P1.1)

"In the beginning, the mentorship topic should explore slowly where were the interests of these students. From there, after he saw what the student's interests were, my mentor could provide several suggestion or alternatives for me, for example, what will it be like in the future" (P1.1)

The topic expressed by this student implies that the mentor must be able to identify early on the strengths and weaknesses of students and be able to use the knowledge that mentors have to help students achieve their learning goals.¹³ A topic that is also liked by students is if the mentor has a relationship with the faculty/academic, can share interests or background which continues to be carried out and developed during the mentoring period.¹⁴ Mentors should understand about mentoring program, faculty and curriculum information, and timelines of study.⁹ Topics that can be given during mentorship include identifying which areas can still be developed, student learning progress, encouraging self-awareness of self-development, and updating action plans.¹⁸

Theme 4: Model of mentoring

The fourth theme that could be drawn from the discussion was related to how to mentor in the future to be more valuable. These themes could be grouped into description of the future, professionalism, support, time availability, and giving hope.

Students hope that there would be an overview of future careers in future academic mentorship.

"What kind of future challenges must be mentioned, so it's not only good in terms of the positives of this study medicine, but also the negative sides of this study medicine. Later, it can be an illustration for students what will happen in the future as a doctor" (P2.5)

"Maybe talk about his experience, the bitter sweetness of being a doctor that he has experienced, meaning his personal experience, and give input, motivation" (P2.6)

One thing that has not been done in current academic mentorship and is expected to happen in the future is to describe the future career of students. This description of future careers greatly influences culture, so that if students are provided with mentoring that emphasizes the importance of understanding individual culture and/or the environment, it will enable each student to see in the context of what a future career will look like.¹³ Mentors have an important role in providing a projected picture of their students' careers, including direction and support for their professional and career development.¹⁰ With a description of future careers, it is hoped that future academic mentoring will build a community of practice for students for their future.¹⁴

The image of professionalism as a doctor was also expected by students in future academic mentorship.

"I want to be successful, the plan is like this, so hopefully I can achieve this. So, submitted my plan to the mentor, I hope he support my plan." (P1.8)

"From made an offer or at least gave an example of a scholarship that might be able to support me in the future." (P1.5)

"Tell us about his activities, maybe he can open up about how busy you were when you became a doctor, when you finished you continued to be a doctor, after that when you took your master's degree or specialist, maybe that can open up discussions" (P2.3)

"How was the difficulty in the past and rising from difficulties when he is studying or looking for a scholarship, like that anyway" (P1.5)

Professionalism and the formation of a professional identity are potential areas to be explored and developed through a needs assessment from the start of meeting with mentorship students.¹² The mentor's skills and experience in his career that enable the mentor to provide real-world examples for students, can provide mentorship for students on how to be

successful in a career in medicine.²⁰ This can be achieved if the mentor is able to provide support and assistance generously, patiently and understands how to direct support for his students in achieving their learning goals.¹³ It is the responsibility of advisers and faculty to develop the mentor-student relationship to provide a safe and supportive environment for students.²¹ Medical institutions must provide students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and sufficient opportunities to ensure that students are not only good in their knowledge, but also in their future careers.²² Faculty must ensure the mentoring environment that support and nurtures the process of mentorship.⁹ By increasing students' knowledge about future careers, including their roles and responsibilities, it can provide support for them how to become good doctors in the future. Mentorship is important in medical education to be able to develop personally and professionally to become a doctor in the future.

This research provides students' perspectives on valuable academic mentorship if there is a good mentors-students relationship, providing support, hope and role models, flexibility, and effectiveness of academic mentorship, as well as students' hopes for academic mentorship in the future. This is the strength of this study because this research can picture how valuable academic mentorship emerged directly from students in various years. However, this perspective is still limited to only undergraduate students in one institution. Different situations and backgrounds of medical education institutions are very likely to bring up different perceptions of valuable academic mentorship according to students.

CONCLUSIONS

Students interpret an academic mentorship as guidance that provides hope and support according to student needs, motivates students, presents a role model for students, even though the time and depth of interpersonal relationships are currently felt to be lacking by students. Hence, support, adequate mentoring time, a sense of security when telling stories, non-hierarchical relationships, reflective questions, and constructive suggestions on any mentorship are needed in student-mentor

relationships. Thus, academic mentors can identify gaps that can be abridged in students as part of the student learning process.

Valuable academic mentorship according to students is if there is a flexibility in mentoring time. That time flexibility will enable an effective communication between the academic mentor and students. One of the components of effective communication according to students is the topic of the mentoring itself which makes academic mentoring valuable. In the future, students expect mentorship topics that can describe future careers and describe the professionalism of a doctor, including roles and responsibilities as a medical graduate and a doctor in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research must be continued for academic mentorship during clinical stages because the learning and mentoring styles are different from the undergraduate stage. Research can also be developed on how valuable academic mentorship is from the mentors' side and multi-institution to get a more comprehensive picture of valuable academic mentorship.

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COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no competing interests related to the study.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Oscar Gilang Purnajati – developing research proposal, collecting data, data analysis, and publication manuscript.

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