

# MBA Mentorship in India: Mentee Expectations

**Sudepta Pradhan and Sunny Bose**

*IBS Hyderabad, IFHE University, Hyderabad, India*

**Makhmoor Bashir**

*Qassim University, Buraidah, Saudi Arabia*

**Rik Paul**

*BML Munjal University, Gurgaon, Haryana, India*

**Venugopal Rao**

*IBS Hyderabad, IFHE University, Hyderabad, India*

**Abstract.** Mentoring programs have been on the increase in business schools in recent years. This study aims to look into the features of mentoring programs in business education in India and capture the mentees' opinions regarding the issues related to such programs. Using a qualitative approach, the study conducted 28 in-depth interviews of final-year business management students from a reputed education institution in India. Findings revealed that mentors expected to play specific roles in the personal and academic life of students, and any deviance from their expectations caused high dissatisfaction among mentees. Mentors' lack of communication and behavioural issues were significant setbacks to the mentoring relationship. The success of such programs depends on the guidelines implemented by the institution. Mentors and mentees should also be aware of their roles and expected outcomes from the programme within cultural contexts. This study has important implications for institutions and policymakers in India and other emerging nations.

**Keywords:** mentoring, content analysis, qualitative research, mentorship program.

## 1. Introduction

The report by Olivet Nazarene University (2019) (Commons 2020) based on a survey of 3,000 employees (USA) considers mentorship a fortifying factor for one's career development, with mentors occupying a unique position in work and life. Mentoring has slowly gained a certain level of importance over the past few decades, given the fact that proper guidance is a pre-requisite for success in any field (Keller & DuBois 2019; Nwankwo & Otaru 2019). Guidance can be received

*This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.*

*Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url*

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JOBE/abstractjobe14pradhanetal.html>

*Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson [pneilson@neilsonjournals.com](mailto:pneilson@neilsonjournals.com)*

*© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2021.*

equally from any source, a senior or peer (Kram & Isabella 1985). The most successful mentors put relationships before the mentorship; focus on character rather than competency; voice optimism openly and are quiet with the criticism; and are more loyal to the mentee than to the company (Tjan 2017).

A certain level of connection between the mentor and the mentee is required for a mentorship relationship to succeed (Keller & DuBois 2019). The relationship should help people break away from their official roles (superior versus inferior) and treat them as people. Generally, the mentorship program is designed to acquire job skills (Mohammed *et al.* 2019). Good mentors transcend beyond competency and help build character, values, and self-awareness (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller 2000). Studies have investigated various aspects of mentoring, such as the significance and nature of the relationship between both parties. Mentoring plays a significant role in career selection, success, advancement, and productivity (Sambunjak, Straus, & Marusic 2006; Gray & Armstrong 2003).

However, the concept of mentorship is highly under-valued in academic institutions and neglected during promotions (Sambunjak, Straus, & Marusic 2006; Paice, Hard, & Moss 2002). A handful of recent studies in the context of academic mentoring have looked at the unique role of teachers and the challenges of mentoring (Orland-Barak & Wang 2020; Brabazon & Schulz 2020). Taylor (2020) focuses on the significance of diverse people learning from each other. There are differences in how mentoring works in business compared to academia. Studies in business education explore the challenges and support provided to the mentees (Ghosh 2012). There is also a dearth of studies carried out in business education institutions and especially in India, so this study used an Indian management/business education institute sample as a focus for the study. The objective was to assess the success of the mentor-mentee relationship within the institution.

The cultural context is important because it underlies the mentor-mentee relationship dynamic. India is basically a collectivist based society with typically high-power distancing (Hofstede 1986). It is essentially different from western cultures, where most of the research on mentor-mentee relationships has been carried out. In addition, in India there exists an ancient inter-personal process between the mentor and the mentee/disciple known as the '*guru- shishya parampara*' (Raina 2002). "One very distinctive characteristic of the guru-shishya relationship is its poly-variant nature. It indicates the all-encompassing quality of this relationship. Dynamics of the relationship indicate that its basis is a complete transformation of the shishya by the guru" (p. 167). India, therefore, offers a unique opportunity to study the mentor-mentee relationships based on particular expectations and dynamics.

The objectives of this study were twofold: first, to understand what mentees expect from a mentoring program; and second, to understand the barriers to a successful mentorship. We further went on to ask mentees for their suggestions on how to make the program more successful. We focused on a management

institution with an official mentoring program already in place. The opinions of the mentees that had undergone the process were investigated to gauge the success of the mentorship program. We conducted 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews of second-year students at a business school in India. These students were officially assigned a faculty mentor for their entire two years of the MBA program. Despite an established mentoring program, the findings revealed that the mentees had several problems. Typically mentees could not connect with their mentors due to a mismatch of interests, and a lack of engagement and communication between both sides. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing an insight into these problems and highlighting solutions for mentees in an Indian business educational setting.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section provides a detailed review of literature on mentorship, mentoring in Higher Education, especially business education, the role of a mentor, and barriers to mentorship. The methodology section discusses the qualitative approach used in the study. The third section deals with the results and findings of the study with a discussion in terms of mentee expectations, their experiences with the mentorship program, significant difficulties faced during mentorship, and their opinions/ suggestions to improve the program. The final section is a discussion of the results, and looks at the theoretical contribution and managerial implications.

## 2. Review of the Literature

Mentorship is essential for success, and studies have concluded that failed mentorship can negatively affect productivity (Straus, Chatur, & Taylor 2009; Burke & McKeen 1997). Mentors are “*higher ranking, influential senior members of the organization who are committed to providing upward mobility and support to their protégées’ career*” (Ragins & McFarlin 1990; Kram 1985). Mentoring relationships play a significant role in organizational success (Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher 1988), career development (Phillips-Jones 1982; Reich 1985), and career satisfaction (Riley & Wrench 1985).

Mentorship has been established as a significant factor in personal development, career choice, and productivity (Sambunjak, Straus, & Marusic 2006). In the context of higher education, mentoring has been defined at a program level and across interactions between the student with faculties, staff, and students (Crisp & Cruz 2009; Gershenfeld 2014). It has been considered an effective mechanism that has a positive impact on the academic performance of students (Eby & Dolan 2015; Fox *et al.* 2010; Bettinger & Baker 2011); transition to a new institutional setting (Bordes & Arredondo 2005); research output (Horowitz & Christopher 2012); and courses with high attrition levels (Hryciw *et al.* 2013). When students join an academic institution, they often lack the prerequisite knowledge or experience to make significant decisions and tend to be

highly indecisive. During such periods, the role of a mentor can be vital (Tenenbaum *et al.* 2001; Alleman *et al.* 1984).

### ***The Mentorship Relationship***

Mentors are individuals with experience and knowledge committed to supporting their mentees (Kram 1985). They have expertise in “*areas of need identified by the mentee and share wisdom in a nurturing way*”. Cohen (1995) defined a mentor as one who offers “*substantial personal investment over an extended time frame*” and felt strongly for the synergetic effect of a meaningful mentorship. A mentee is someone “*seeking guidance in developing specific competencies, self-awareness and skills in early intervention*” (Bozeman & Feeney 2008). We use the definitions provided by Bozeman and Feeney (2008) in the assessment of mentees in this study. Mentorship programs have been the catalysts for change in teaching over the years and are associated with positive career and job attitudes (Kram 1985). Mentoring is generally informal, while several organizations have tried to replicate the benefits by developing a formal mentoring program (Burke, McKeen & McKenna 1993; Burke & McKeen 1989; Ntho, Pienaar, & Sehularo 2020). Traditional mentoring relationships are formed with the assistance of the organization, by matching mentors and mentees, and promoting the emerging popularity of mentorship (Tyler 1998).

### ***Expectations from Mentors/Mentorship Program***

Mentees and mentors have different sets of expectations from each other. Studies report that mentees prefer approachable, accessible, understanding, patient, and honest mentors (Keyser *et al.* 2008). Mentors are expected to maintain confidentiality, show respect and communicate openly with the mentees. Therefore, the expectations of both parties should be specified to remove any ambiguity. Participants (both mentors and mentees) look for an accessible and cohesive relationship with their mentor for an effective work environment. The mentee in a mentorship programme is expected to be committed to the mentorship program’s plan to succeed. The mentorship program benefits the mentees, so they need to be proactive and make successful relationships. Hutchings, Williamson, and Humphrey (2005) state that mentorship includes giving advice, psychosocial support, role modelling, advice regarding career, intellectual growth of the mentee, and any other help to meet the mentee’s academic needs. Mentorship programs can be developed formally or informally. In formal mentorship programs, students are assigned to mentors by their colleges with structured organizational mentorship programs (Coleen, 2010). In informal structures, the mentorship relationship is developed naturally amongst students and mentors without any formal system (Coleen 2010). Mentoring in business education includes sharing common goals (bringing employees into the institutional culture and supporting career development).