

Quality of Mentor-Mentee Relationships and Career Aspirations of University Students in Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of perceived quality of mentor-mentee relationships on the career aspirations of university students in Kenya participating in the Education for All Children (EFAC) mentoring program. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving 309 university students (51.8% female, 48.2% male; aged 21–26 years) and 309 mentors (59.9% male, 40.1% female) from Kenyan public universities. Quantitative data were collected using the Career Aspiration Scale Revised (CASR) and a mentor-mentee relationship quality scale, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with mentors. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, linear regression analysis, and content analysis were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that most participants had high career aspirations (mean = 92.20, SD = 11.31) while rating the quality of their mentoring relationships as average (mean = 54.01, SD = 11.58). A significant positive correlation was found between perceived mentor-mentee relationship quality and career aspirations ($r = .21, p < .001$). Regression analysis indicated that relationship quality was a significant predictor of career aspirations ($\beta = 0.21, p < .001$), although it explained only 4% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.04$). Qualitative findings highlighted that mentees valued mentors who were attentive, relatable, committed, and—crucially—working in a similar career field. Positive relationships were characterized by mutual engagement, authenticity, trust, empathy, regular face-to-face or live video interactions, and individualized attention. Barriers to quality relationships included mentor busyness, poor communication, mistrust, mismatched expectations, and infrequent contact.

Keywords: Mentoring, mentor-mentee relationship quality, career aspirations, university students, Kenyan universities, EFAC program, higher education.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring describes a range of formal or informal programs and relationships through which a more skilled, experienced, or knowledgeable individual supports a younger person's skill development or well-being (Axford, 2017). Research has consistently shown that mentoring improves overall quality of life. More specifically, learning institutions employ mentoring as an intervention to enhance learners' academic experiences and career focus (Bayer et al., 2013; Bonin, 2013; Collier, 2017; Curtin et al., 2016).

Since the turn of the millennium, scholarly literature on mentoring has grown substantially worldwide, reflecting its effectiveness in helping individuals progress toward their career aspirations. Consequently, assessing the role of mentoring in universities is essential if students are to be guided toward specific career paths (Rhodes, 2006).

The concept of mentoring has ancient roots. In Greek mythology, Mentor was the faithful companion of Odysseus, King of Ithaca. When Odysseus departed for the Trojan War, Mentor was entrusted with managing the household and, crucially, with raising Odysseus's son, Telemachus (the mentee), to become a worthy successor. Thus, a mentor acted as a parent, teacher, role model, approachable counselor, trusted adviser, challenger, and encourager. A mentor was considered more than a teacher—a figure who was all things to all people: half-god and half-human, half-male and half-female. Mentor symbolized the union of goal and path (Ronald, 2017).

Mentoring relationships typically focus on psychosocial support or instrumental (sponsorship) support in career, academic, and professional development (Curtin et al., 2016). Psychosocial support includes guidance and encouragement that boost mentees' confidence, identity, persistence, and career aspirations. Instrumental support, by contrast, emphasizes developing skills, knowledge, or competencies to enhance productivity and performance in the workplace or, for students, in academic settings (Eby et al., 2013). In higher education, mentoring relationships target college student success by fostering psychosocial development (Hernandez et al.,

2017), leadership development (Priest & Donley, 2014), academic performance, and transition out of college (Cooke et al., 2017).

Quality of mentoring relationships refers to mentoring that meets mentees' needs, encompassing both satisfaction with and depth of the relationship (Payne, 2018). It is characterized by connectedness, meaningful interaction, genuine caring, and support from the mentor (Helgevold et al., 2015; Nguyen & Parr, 2018). A mentor may provide instruction, inspiration, emotional support, and role modeling while sharing knowledge about their career path (Bullock, 2017; Izadinia, 2015). An effective mentoring relationship is respectful, responsive, and reciprocal, fostering a collegial environment where both parties engage freely and mentees feel comfortable asking questions (Nolan, 2017). Quality mentoring relationships enhance mentee development and improve information exchange for both parties, thereby producing better outcomes for mentees (Allen & Wright, 2014).

Career aspirations fall under psychosocial support, as they involve developing interest and goals in a specific career path (Curtin et al., 2016). A career aspiration is an individual's long-term career goal, plan, or dream that extends beyond the present. During undergraduate education, students have the opportunity to explore and assess their career interests before committing to a path. Guidance from a more experienced professional in a similar area of interest at this early stage is instrumental to their development (Eby et al., 2013). The impact of mentoring programs on students' career success is increasingly central to educational psychology discourse worldwide.

The aim of mentorship regarding students' career aspirations is to transfer knowledge and socialize students into professional norms and standards, thereby influencing their career decision-making (Lent & Brown, 2013). Some scholars suggest that aspects such as frequency of mentoring and number of mentors drive beneficial outcomes (Lambert et al., 2018; McKinsey, 2016). Others argue that the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship is more critical (Liang et al., 2017; Lund et al., 2019). Underpinning quality are mutual engagement, authentic communication, trust, empathy, and empowerment, which lead mentees to perceive a healthy, high-quality relationship (Strada-Gallup, 2018). A quality relationship provides an environment for psychological empowerment, where mentees develop self-efficacy and confidence in their competence, thereby influencing their career goals and plans. Consistent with prior empirical work (Bierer et al., 2015; Curtin et al., 2016; MacPhee et al., 2013), the current study argued that quality of mentorship is positively associated with career aspirations among EFAC mentees.

2. Mentorship Programs in Kenyan Universities

Kenyan universities are increasingly adopting mentorship programs delivered through face-to-face meetings, e-mentoring, and group mentoring by lecturers, university counselors, and alumni—contrasting with high schools, where peer mentoring and teacher mentors are common. The Cabinet Secretary of the Ministry of Education launched mentoring programs in schools and provided policy guidelines primarily aimed at improving leadership skills, academics, and discipline, with minimal emphasis on career aspirations. Within universities, the existence of mentorship programs is further evidenced by some institutions establishing directorates of mentoring.

Mentorship programs are also aggressively implemented by organized organizations such as foundations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community-based organizations (CBOs), many of which also provide financial support to university students. According to web rankings, Wings to Fly, Education for All Children (EFAC), Kenya Education Fund (KEF), Global Give Back Circle (GGBC), and Executive Leadership Network (ELNET) actively participate in post-high school mentorship in Kenya. These organizations vary in how they promote life skills identification, career education, guidance, and career choice among mentees.

3. The Current Study

University students' career aspirations are often influenced by factors such as poor career guidance, lack of career information, the prestige associated with certain careers, personal interests, and significant people in their lives. To support students in Kenyan institutions of higher learning, mentoring programs have been launched either by the institutions themselves or by partner organizations. Current mentoring efforts are generally restricted to orienting mentees to university life and aiding their adjustment to new learning environments. These programs not only vary in structure and practices but also lack crucial empirical evidence on their efficacy, particularly regarding students' career aspirations. Consequently, it is difficult to identify the best ways to support mentees' career aspirations.

EFAC is a Kenyan mentorship organization advocating for leadership, economic stability, and social change through an education-to-employment program for brilliant, impoverished Kenyan students. EFAC pairs each mentee with a professional mentor for the entire university period. The program uses various tactics to promote mentee success, including careful mentor selection and training for both mentors and mentees to foster quality relationships. EFAC provides essential mentoring, life skills, career guidance, and sex education training to intelligent students from disadvantaged backgrounds and is considered to have strong test outcomes and tertiary transition rates compared to other mentorship programs in the country. However, little information exists on the program's effectiveness regarding students' career aspirations. The current study examined the effect of mentor-mentee relationship quality on the career aspirations of university students in the EFAC mentoring program.

4. Methodology

The study was conducted with 309 university students under the EFAC mentorship program. The sample comprised 160 (51.8%) female and 149 (48.2%) male students, aged 21 to 26—an age bracket where career decisions remain critical and course changes are still possible in line with career aspirations. The study also included 185 (59.9%) male and 124 (40.1%) female mentors.

4.1 Instrumentation

Data were collected using a self-administered semi-structured questionnaire and interview schedules.

Biographical information: Data on age and gender were collected.

Career Aspiration: Data were collected using the Career Aspiration Scale Revised (CASR) by Gregor & O'Brien (2015). Responses were rated on a five-point scale (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always).

Mentor-Mentee Relationship: Data were collected using perceived quality of mentor-mentee relationship scale.

Mentors' Interview Schedule: Open-ended questions collected information on mentoring program practices, views on mentees' career aspirations, and the mentor-mentee relationship. Respondents were invited to provide any comments they deemed appropriate.

4.2 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. Mentoring program practices were measured using predetermined psychometric tests on a 1–5 scale; means indicated the level of agreement with each statement. Linear regression analysis established the relationship between mentor-mentee relationship quality and career aspirations. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis: key informant responses for each interview item were categorized into themes, and consistencies and differences across themes were identified.

5. Results and Discussion

The study objective was to examine the influence of perceived quality of mentor-mentee relationship on career aspirations of mentees in Kenyan public universities. Respondents rated their relationship quality using 20 statements (1–5 scale). Ratings were summed into a single score for further analysis.

To establish career aspirations, students responded to 24 items about their feelings and perceptions regarding their career aspirations during university studies (same 1–5 scale). Responses were summed into a single career aspirations index. Scores ranged from 36 to 115, with a mean of 92.20 (SD = 11.31), indicating that most participants had high career aspirations.

Mentor-mentee relationship scores ranged from 20 to 84, with a mean of 54.01 (SD = 11.58), indicating that participants rated relationship quality as average.

Pearson product-moment correlation revealed a significant positive correlation between perceived quality of mentor-mentee relationship and career aspirations ($r = .21$). Further regression analysis showed that perceived relationship quality was a significant predictor of career aspirations (see Table 1). However, perceived quality explained only 4% of the variance in career aspirations.

Table 1. Regression Analysis of Mentor-Mentee Relationship and Career Aspirations

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Std. Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	81.34	3.03		26.83	0.00		
Mentor Mentee Relationship	0.20	0.06	0.21	3.67	0.00	1.00	1.00

Note. Dependent variable= Career aspirations; $R = 0.21$; $R^2 = 0.04$; Adjusted $R = 0.04$; $F = 13.42$, $p = 0.00$

These results align with McMorris et al. (2018), who found that mentor-mentee relationship quality positively impacts mentees' professional development. Similarly, Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017) found that mentorship promoted career aspirations among young women leaders by increasing confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, and sense of belonging in their chosen career paths.

The finding that mentees perceived mentoring relationships as only moderate in quality may explain the small effect on career aspirations. Notably, other scholars have also found small to moderate effect sizes (ranging from .18 to .29) of mentoring interactions on various youth outcomes in the United States (Raposa et al., 2019). This suggests that while relationship quality matters, other factors are more closely related to career aspirations.

According to Bowers et al. (2014), characteristics such as mutual engagement, authenticity, feelings of empowerment, encouragement, inspiration, and the ability to navigate differences (e.g., age, gender, culture, perspective) all contribute to mentees' perception of relationship quality. Mentees who experienced quality relationships were more likely to report positive outcomes (Liang et al., 2016; O'Sullivan et al., 2017). Flexibility and sensitivity to individual interests and preferences also fostered quality interactions (Pryce, 2012).

These characteristics were evident in focus group discussions and interviews. For example, mentors who were relaxed and positive during sessions reassured mentees, who perceived the relationship as helpful. Being called by name, asked about their interests, and shown genuine attention was important to mentees, as expressed by one participant:

"I always feel special when I am with my mentor because they show interest in what I want to do. I look forward to our meetings, and I feel excited, happy, and important."

Positive feelings and mentees' state of mind during sessions contributed to perceptions of quality. Interview findings from mentees were corroborated by mentors, who described their relationships as good and believed this positively influenced mentees' career aspirations. Mentoring coordinators, program managers, and peer mentors also characterized mentor-mentee relationships as largely positive.

Positive interactions were more characteristic of one-on-one face-to-face mentoring and live video/phone conversations than of group mentoring or e-mentoring using email, text, or social media. Mentees who experienced only group or written communication may have rated quality differently.

Kearns (2017) posits that trust, empathy, authenticity, common interests, and relationship duration determine the extent to which mentors influence students' career aspirations—aspects that can be communicated through any mentoring modality.

Frequency of meetings also influences mentorship outcomes (Ayoobzadeh, 2019; Sanyal & Rigby, 2017) and may indicate relationship strength (Eby et al., 2013). Strong relationships yield higher satisfaction and better outcomes (Sanyal & Rigby, 2017). As argued by Collier (2017), the mentor-mentee relationship directly influences mentors' ability to shape career aspirations.

In this study, participants met at least once a month (approximately 12 times per year). By comparison, Meinel et al. (2011) in Germany found that mentees met mentors an average of seven times per year, with weaker reported impact. Infrequent contact can lead to feelings of abandonment and disappointment; conversely, mentors may become discouraged and less committed. Gettings and Wilson (2014) found that dissatisfying relationships

negatively affect mentors' commitment, reducing mentoring time and thus limiting influence on career aspirations.

Mentees also valued having a mentor in a similar career, which facilitated role modeling (Yong et al., 2020). In their study on mentoring and aspirations for science careers, Yong et al. found that students without family or friends in STEM showed amplified growth in science-related beliefs and interests after mentoring by young scientists. Close interaction with mentors in desired professions provides concrete experiences of future careers, making it easier for mentees to envision themselves in similar roles:

"The profession of my mentor influenced my career aspirations. Seeing that she was successful inspired me to work hard and pursue a similar career and aim to be equally successful."

Qualitative results suggest mentees benefit more when mentors share a similar professional line (Lo et al., 2013), as mentees perceive this as useful. Such mentors provide career-specific information, guidance on professional paths, and advice on relevant courses:

"My mentor had access to information about other relevant short courses that I needed to make it in my career. Also, I felt that I could freely contact my mentor and ask any questions. It was easy for me to get prompt and relevant information whenever I needed it."

Overall, mentoring relationships characterized by closeness, communication, similarity, fun, and engagement were more beneficial. Mentees rated relationships highly when mentors were relatable, humorous, easygoing, yet committed to goals. These findings align with Goldner and Ben-Eliyahu (2021), who emphasized that quality mentoring relationships involve perceived support, trust, sensitivity to individual needs, and intentionality in helping mentees achieve goals. Conversely, relationships characterized by poor communication, mistrust, or lack of emotional closeness led to lower satisfaction and less benefit (Bonin, 2013; Gordon et al., 2013; McMorris et al., 2018).

Although relationship quality was largely positive, the finding that it explained only 4% of variance in career aspirations may indicate that perceived quality was not uniformly high. Focus groups and interviews revealed occasional strained relationships. For example:

"My mentee was not always open or honest. This always led to strained relationships. I do not know whether it had anything to do with our age differences. I travel a lot and did not always have time to meet him, so we had only limited opportunities for meetings."

Conversely, some mentors were too busy, according to mentees; questions were not always well answered, and some mentees felt their mentors did not create enough time to address their concerns. Some mentors had negative attitudes or withheld information.

Mentees who were focused, consistent, and engaged encouraged their mentors and were more likely to benefit (Bonin, 2013). Mentors were dissatisfied when mentees frequently missed meetings or showed little interest. Thus, while mentees benefit from relating to mentors, mentors also benefit from relating to mentees. Mentor dissatisfaction likely reduces the likelihood of positive outcomes for mentees.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of perceived mentor-mentee relationship quality on the career aspirations of university students in Kenya participating in the EFAC mentoring program. The findings lead to several key conclusions.

First, the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship is a significant, positive predictor of university students' career aspirations. Students who perceived their mentoring relationships as high in mutual engagement, trust, authenticity, and support reported stronger career aspirations. This confirms the theoretical and practical importance of attending to relationship quality in mentoring interventions.

Second, despite this significant association, the effect size was modest (4% variance explained). This indicates that while mentoring relationship quality matters, it is neither the sole nor the dominant influence on career

aspirations. Other factors likely play substantial roles. Consequently, mentoring programs should be viewed as one component of a comprehensive career development strategy rather than a standalone solution.

Third, qualitative findings revealed that mentees value mentors who are attentive, relatable, committed, and—crucially—working in a similar career field. Career-aligned mentorship appears to facilitate role modeling, career-specific guidance, and the development of concrete career identities. Therefore, intentional mentor-mentee matching based on career interests may enhance program effectiveness.

Fourth, the nature and frequency of interactions matter. One-on-one, synchronous, face-to-face or live video interactions foster stronger relationships than group or asynchronous e-mentoring. Regular contact (at least monthly) appears necessary but not sufficient; the quality of those interactions—characterized by genuine caring, responsiveness, and mutual engagement—is paramount.

Fifth, barriers to quality relationships—including mentor busyness, poor communication, mistrust, and mismatched expectations—were prevalent and likely undermined the potential impact of mentoring. These barriers point to the need for robust mentor selection, training, and ongoing support, as well as mechanisms for addressing relational difficulties when they arise.

7. Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are offered for mentoring programs in Kenyan universities and similar contexts:

1. Invest in mentor training that emphasizes relational skills (active listening, empathy, and authenticity), goal-setting, and strategies for maintaining engagement over extended periods.
2. Implement intentional mentor-mentee matching based on career interests, professional fields, and personal compatibility, rather than random or availability-based assignment.
3. Create mechanisms for monitoring relationship quality and intervening when problems arise (e.g., mediation, rematching, or additional support).
4. Integrate mentoring with other career development interventions, such as career counseling, internships, job shadowing, and workshops on career exploration and decision-making.
5. Conduct longitudinal research to examine how mentoring relationship quality affects career aspirations over time and to identify moderators (e.g., mentee gender, socioeconomic status, academic major) that may amplify or diminish effects.

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