**Mentorship needs**

BY N E D A M U L J l 2021-11-29

IN a recent discussion on the role of teachers in schools and universities, many aspects of their demanding job came up. Whilst it is undeniable that most teachers work really hard to meet their targets, sometimes a focused assessment of how they are working also merits attention. `Work smart` is a mantra for those who have learnt to use it effectively.

Chasing students to complete their assignments on time, trying to motivate students who are reluctant to study, conducting tutorials or remedial classes for those who need extra help are just some of the avenues teachers find themselves engaged in. As they help students bridge learning gaps, many invest time and effort way beyond their job description and often feel discouraged when they don`t see results. The truth is, we often end up churning the same wheel with increasing effort and continue to see disappointing result s.

These efforts, although critical, cannot work on an ad hoc basis. No matter what their age, students need mentoring and, until mentorship programmes are institutionalised and embedded in our education system, we may continue to face the challenges that can easily be avoided. A mentor is typically an adviser, teacher, role model and friend. It`s a matching process where skills, personality and mindset come together to establish collaboration that is goal-oriented and targets challenges specifically.

Mentoring isn`t just useful for students. In fact, studies show that teachers need mentoring at every stage of their career, even in leadership roles, and it shouldn`t just be the responsibility of deans, directors and school managers to help and support junior staff. A formal mentorship programme is well structured, with clearly defined focus areas, timelines, feedback mechanisms and reflective conversations. A successful mentorship programme can potentially subvert existing biases in institutions, help staff increase their skills set, enhance staff motivation and improve retention rates.

Often, senior and high-performing employees can share their vision, ideas and opportunities for development with their colleagues. Interestingly, mentorship has a long history as it sprung up at a time when the only way to acquire professional or vocational skills was by spending time with more experienced colleagues, learning from their personal narratives, and having someone generally watch closely so mistakes wouldn`t be repeated. Whilst mentorship was a little intimidating with the `big brother is watching you` approach, it also ensured integration at several levels of professional hierarchy and helped bypass the isolation and exclusivity that is the hallmark of many educationalinstitutions today.

Mentorship programmes that operate in group settings, or with external links with other institutions have the added benefit of wider learning networks, creating opportunities for collaboration between institutions and helping teachers acquire skills that may not be taught internally. As mentors talk about their own experiences, appearing fallible and approachable, a level of trust through a recognition of authenticity develops and becomes pervasive leading to greater cohesion, empathy and positive regard among employees. Mentoring also helps contribute to a positive ethos by changing employees` misguided perceptions. For example, often students and staff feel they will be judged incompetent if they ask for advice.

Through mentorship programmes, students may find a sense of belonging to the institution, as they establish a connection with those interacting with them. Research shows a sense of belonging is essential to student motivation, and is particularly relevantin higher education.

It`s important to remember that a mentor `feeds` the process but does not `feast on it`. Most mentoring programmes work when pursued diligently with consistency and a stringent regard for the out-comes. Most informal mentoring at institutions where a well-meaning teacher may decide to support a student or a colleague may help out another through a tough situation is not a constructive process that can culminate into sustainable goal-setting.

Formal mentorship programmes, on the other hand, have the power to change the trajectory of students` lives by creating pathways.

Mentoring students gives teachers a more rewarding teaching experience, helps them stay connected with students and keeps them aware of individual students` capabilities and challenges. In fact, mentorship can help teachers identify the grey areas in learning so quickly that many issues can be nipped in the bud. Mentoring also minimises behavioural disruptions, making classroom management easier.

Students usually don`t want to be told what to do. They need a guide on the side to show them what they can do.  The writer is senior manager, professional development, Oxford University Press Pakistan and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK.