



Academic Orientation and Mentoring - Tackling Gender Disparities and Higher Education Institution Limitations in Africa

Executive Summary

Most universities in the developed world have instigated orientation and mentoring programmes for probationary academic members of staff to allow them to reach their full potential as teachers and researchers. Orientation and mentoring programmes in most African Universities are lacking, not functional and/or not implemented which places new academics at a disadvantage and can be career threatening. Based on extensive consultation and questionnaire with environmental health (EH) academics indicated that up to 63% faced problems when beginning their careers in academia. The most common problem related to a lack of orientation and being appointed to a position for which they had no prior experience or support. Mentoring from more experienced academics in their department and faculty, particularly for female academics was absent or not properly applied in the majority of institutions. The disparities between men and women in their professional academic careers must also be taken into consideration in terms of mentoring and support to enable all academics to develop successful teaching and learning careers. With the lack of institutional experience held in some Universities, such mentoring schemes can be strengthened through the use of regional and pan African networks to allow academics to gain access to a wealth of experience and advice in their fields. The Africa Academy for Environmental Health (AAEH) recommends the following actions on the part of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and associated networks to address these challenges as piloted by the AAEH: (1) Development of standard orientation package for all new members of academic staff; (2) initiation of mentoring schemes for academic staff using traditional and innovative methods both institutionally and regionally similar to that achieved in environmental health.

Background

Although there has been an influx in the number of female academics in the fields of science and engineering their representation remains disproportionate to their male counterparts. Consultation with environmental health academics in 15 institutions in 11 countries outlined two main factors for this imbalance: (1) the compatibility between a professional career and their family/caretaking role which encourage women to seek more traditional careers in female dominated fields, (2) a lack of willingness of senior faculty members to orientate, mentor and involve junior academics in their research and teaching and learning activities. The same consultation outlined a number of ways in which these issues could be addressed to enable them to continue and develop their careers in academia. These included the need for effective orientation when joining academia and subsequent support in the form of teaching and research mentorship.

Challenges in developing mentoring schemes in African HEIs

Evidence of the benefits of mentorship for both the mentor and protégé are well documented and include career enhancement, research collaboration, professional networking and development and increased competence and self esteem, In addition, those who receive early support from senior faculty members have been shown to have a significant advantage in terms of academic career advancement due to an increased publication rate, grants received, collaboration and professional network (Chandler 1996). Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the structure of a female academics career, which may include interruptions

related to family roles, may impede the formation of traditional mentoring models. It is also reported that female academics benefit more from same sex mentorships, however this is very difficult to achieve in environmental health in Africa where the majority of females are within the lower levels of the academic hierarchy. As such, alternative and innovative mentoring programmes need to be devised to provide the necessary support network to academics so that they, and their profession can develop and improve.

Africa Academy as a Model for Mentoring Female Academics

In order to address these challenges the AAEH, through the Association of African Universities (AAU) Mobilising Regional Capacity Initiative, entered into dialogue with female academics to determine innovative methods to provide support and mentoring in environmental health. Although the depth of senior academics within individual institutions was often seen as weak, it was determined that as an academic network the AAEH had a number of senior female faculty members and experienced researchers within its membership. Therefore, in terms of traditional mentorship, it is feasible through the network to identify suitable female academics to mentor protégés in the various fields of environmental health. In addition, this offers female to female mentoring schemes to be developed which have been shown to be more effective when addressing the different challenges faced by women in their professional careers. The AAEH also advocates the use of male mentors within the scheme and the use of more than one mentor by a protégé to gain increased knowledge and skills in both teaching and research. With the AAEH links to the International Federation for Environmental Health (www.ifeh.org), academics can also gain access to mentors outside the African continent who can assist with their professional development. In addition to traditional mentoring methods, the AAEH has developed a peer mentoring system which allows environmental health female academics and practitioners to discuss issues electronically through the African Women Environmental Health Network (<http://aaeh-network.ning.com>). Peer mentoring has been shown to be effective in withstanding career interruptions and allows open discussion of common demands which can face colleagues due to a reduction in the power differential which may exist with senior academics. Further to these networks, the AAEH will also be developing guidance on the development of mentoring schemes for HEIs offering environmental health to adopt and develop.

Policy Recommendations

- (1) In order to improve the academic practice of teaching and learning and research in African HEIs, priority needs to be given to the development and implementation of effective orientation and mentoring schemes for academic staff.
- (2) Challenges facing HEIs in Africa include the lack of senior experienced staff to act as role models, provide traditional mentoring, and the lack of consideration given to the disparities in the needs of male and female academics. As such, International, pan African and Regional networks can be used to increase capacity within professional fields for mentoring.
- (3) Alternative and innovate methods of mentoring must be considered to address limitations in current mentoring schemes. This should include the use of electronic forums to increase communication and collaboration between institutions.

References and Further Reading

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