ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the informal mentoring experiences of doctoral students in Ghanaian universities, a context where formalised mentoring structures are markedly absent. Mentoring relationships that develop organically, without formal structure, assignment, or institutional supervision, are referred to as informal mentoring. These relationships are typically founded on mutual respect, shared interests, and spontaneous interaction, rather than predefined objectives or timelines. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and employing a multiple case study design informed by phenomenological principles, the research investigates the dynamics of informal mentoring at the University of Ghana and the University of Education, Winneba. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 doctoral students and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that informal mentoring is predominantly organic, voluntary, and relationship-driven, often evolving from formal supervisory roles into holistic partnerships that provide both career-related (e.g., sponsorship, academic coaching) and psychosocial support (e.g., emotional encouragement, role modelling). These relationships are crucial for enhancing research productivity, academic confidence, and personal resilience, often preventing attrition. However, access to effective mentoring is inequitable, heavily reliant on individual students' initiative and interpersonal skills. Significant challenges were identified, including institutional inconsistencies, overwhelming faculty workloads leading to limited availability, and deep-seated cultural barriers, such as hierarchical respect and gender dynamics, which inhibit open communication and create vulnerabilities, particularly for female students. The study concludes that while informal mentoring is a critical supplement to formal supervision, its ad hoc nature perpetuates disparities. The study recommends the intentional institutionalisation of mentoring through structured policies, comprehensive training for supervisors based on adaptive mentoring principles, and initiatives to foster a more collaborative and equitable academic culture. By adopting a structured yet flexible framework, such as the proposed Super-Mentoring Adaptive System (SMAS), Ghanaian universities can transform doctoral education to better support the holistic development and success of their scholars.