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RESEARCH ARTICLE:

A Conceptual Framework for Mentorship Support to Early-Career Black Women Academics in South Africa

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Abstract

Globally, career development is a challenge for women academics at higher education institutions. In South African higher education institutions, Black women academics still lag in terms of career progression and their representation in leadership positions compared to their male counterparts. While structural and systemic challenges contribute to this, a lack of formal mentorship support for Black women academics is among the underlying reasons. Against this background, using various mentorship models applied in higher education institutions as the theoretical lens, this article explores a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career Black women academics, which will often happen in a cross-cultural context due to historical imbalances. Through a qualitative research approach, a narrative literature review is provided based on content analysis of literature, both peer-reviewed and non-reviewed. Through a conceptual framework, this study provides insight regarding the type of mentorship support that is required to advance the career development trajectory of early-career Black women academics in South Africa, considering the paucity of women's mentorship programs at most of our higher education institutions. Recommendations propose how mentorships can be integrated into the formal career development trajectory of these academics.

Keywords*: mentorship; higher education; women; black academics; South Africa*

Introduction

Globally, career development is a challenge for women academics at higher education institutions. Academic institutions around the world have increased their commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity in leadership and management and specifically focus on the development and leadership capabilities of women academics. These efforts are needed even more so in Africa as research shows a lack of mentoring is a prevalent challenge experienced by early-career academics in Africa (Subbaye and Dhunpath, 2016; Mukhwana *et al*., 2020) and other regions of the world. In this regard, women as early-career academics experience difficulties in adapting to academic life because they feel marginalised, disengaged, and unrecognised (Aiston and Jung, 2016), and have no guidance for undertaking their responsibilities effectively to build their academic careers (Kelchtermans and Veugelers, 2013). In South African higher education institutions (HEIs), black women academics similarly still lag in terms of career progression and their representation in leadership positions compared to their male counterparts. While structural and systemic challenges contribute to this, a lack of formal nuanced mentorship support for black women academics is among the underlying reasons.

Research conducted by, amongst others, Hlatshwayo (2020), Hlengwa (2019) and Mokhele (2013), shows that black women still lag compared to their male counterparts in the representation of race, but specifically in senior academic leadership positions in higher education. According to Divala (2014), Mohope (2014), Ndlovu (2014), and Zulu (2013), the forms of discrimination encountered by black women academics include a lack of mentoring as well as supportive networks. Thus, black women academics are prioritised as part of the transformation agenda

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in South African HEIs to prioritise their voice (Ramohai, 2019). As such, in 2012 the National Planning Commission of South Africa identified the need for recruiting, developing, and retaining black and women academics for the higher education sector. Not only was this in response to the demand for employment equity and representation of disadvantaged groups, but it was also necessary for transformation at institutions to address the phenomenon of the 'ageing professoriate' (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012). Reflections from scholars on black female academia highlight multiple challenges and structural barriers to thriving, including intersectionality of masculine discourses, disparities, and suppression (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Hlengwa, 2019; Mokhele, 2013).

Looking at the South African case, only three of the 26 South African universities provide clear information on women's mentorship programmes on their institutional websites, suggesting official institutional support and endorsement. The nature of these programmes varies from structured learning programmes at the University of Johannesburg to a combination of learning, networking and research opportunities at the University of Witwatersrand's Female Academic Leaders Fellowship, and the University of Limpopo's Women's Academic Solidarity Association (University of Johannesburg, 2023; University of Limpopo, 2023; University of Witwatersrand, 2023). Of the 26 public universities in South Africa, eight mention mentorship programs and initiatives specifically aimed at supporting women academics. At most of these institutions, the programs appear to not be institutionally driven (top-down), but rather stem from the efforts of individual researchers who apply for grants and launch programmes on their own initiative – a "grassroots" bottom-up approach.

Using various mentorship models applied in HEIs as the theoretical lens, this study explores a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics, which acknowledges the unique complexities of their careers. These complexities include their intersectionality because of race and gender, historical marginalisation in professional settings, the diverse experiences and backgrounds of black women, and enduring power imbalances. Considering the paucity of women's mentorship programmes at most of our higher education institutions, the authors find that much work in this area is needed. As such, the research question posed in this regard is: What could be a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics at South African universities? Using a qualitative research approach, a narrative literature review is provided based on content analysis of literature, both peer-reviewed and non-reviewed. This approach involved the deductive analysis of the content of documents about relevant research concerning mentorship models, modalities, and mentorship programmes. By using a range of electronic search engines, the concepts of mentorship models, modalities, women's mentorship, and mentorship programmes were applied respectively as search terms and adapted as required to identify relevant research that could be included in a narrative literature review. From the content analysis of documents, the topic was explored.

Recommendations from this study propose how mentorships can be integrated into the formal career development trajectory of these academics. These recommendations include mentorship which supports: 1) the enculturation and induction of new appointees; 2) clear career pathing; 3) assistance in developing a professional trajectory; 4) leadership development; 5) establishment of peer and intergenerational networks; 6) mentoring through mentorship development, and 7) evaluation for impact. Against this background, the first section discusses the significance of mentorship for women academics. The next section discusses various mentorship models applied in higher education institutions. This is followed by a discussion of mentorship support for women academics at South African universities. The study concludes with a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics at South African universities.

The Significance of Mentorship for Women Academics

In terms of the Clutterbuck empirical model for mentorship, mentorship is viewed as a way to expand skills and knowledge through guiding, coaching, counselling and networking (Stroude *et al*., 2015). In light of this, mentoring contributes to enabling women academics to excel in their careers by raising awareness, managing performance expectations from an institutional and personal perspective, and creating a supportive and collegial academic environment that will develop their professional character and identity (Mukhwana *et al*., 2020; Maddrell *et al*., 2019; Hollywood *et al*., 2019; Steele and Fisman, 2014). As discussed in the rest of this section, mentorship for women academics is a meaningful way to encourage their advancement in the workplace and is of significance in terms of:

i. Increasing the number of women academics in leadership positions.
ii. Providing guidance for professional and psychological support.

iii. Assisting, supporting, and guiding women academics in their career trajectory.
iv. Fostering wellness through advice on personal and professional matters.

The significance of mentorship among women academics also comes from the need to increase the number of women academics, especially in senior and leadership positions in higher education institutions. Data from UNESCO (2020) indicates that as of June 2020, although women accounted for 44% of doctorate graduates, less than a third of researchers globally were women (30%) and in sub-Saharan Africa 31% (Bello *et al*., 2021). Henley (2015) believes that the outcomes of underrepresentation of women academics at universities can be ascribed to the fact that they are in environments that lack mentors, have fewer opportunities to network, and are unable to obtain tacit institutional information. Though lack of mentorship cannot be the only cause of underrepresentation in leadership positions, the value of dedicated mentoring relationships cannot be understated. Mentoring relationships are significant among women academic staff as the higher education sector is highly competitive, and there is a need for guidance and professional and psychological support. Quality mentorship plays an important role in academic talent development, professional fulfilment, and employee retention. Thus, the mentoring relationship holds significance from a psychosocial and career mentoring perspective (Kocha, 2017; Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021). The foci of career mentoring include exposure, coaching, opportunities that will enhance job-related knowledge and skills, as well as providing the mentee with related and task-specific support (Allen *et al*., 2004; Kao *et al*., 2020). Psychosocial mentoring on the other hand, which is grounded in social-psychological functions, is underpinned by offering confirmation, acceptance, counselling, and friendship (Kammeyer-Mueller and Judge, 2008; Cai *et al*., 2021; Cheung *et al*., 2022).

According to Chitsamatanga *et al*. (2018), mentoring is considered a powerful individual development intervention with outcomes of supporting, guiding, and assisting academics in their career trajectory. Smith (2016) supports this view and highlights that mentoring is essential to professional black African women's career advancement and success as they face more barriers than their male counterparts. Mmope (2020) avers that mentorship strategies for professional black women with an emphasis on ubuntu-infused leadership should be considered by management, given how it could contribute to developing female employees. In academia, women academics face a multitude of obstacles during their academic careers. The obstacles are in part attributed to greater academic and domestic responsibilities, decreased recognition in publications, lower research funding allocations, ingrained institutional disparity, and fewer citations of papers authored by them (Salinas *et al*., 2020; Diele-Viegas *et al*., 2021; Budrikis, 2020). Therefore, mentorship assists them in advancing in their careers through the mentorship support and guidance they receive. In various studies, mentorship proves to be an instrument that can assist women academics in addressing the myriad ways that they are disadvantaged in the workplace. As a tool to boost traditional metrics of academic career success, mentorship can guide women as they strive for higher positions or better working conditions (Maddrell *et al*., 2019). It can increase scholarly articles by developing research skills (Risner *et al*., 2020). Mentorship can improve the likelihood of obtaining funding (Palepu *et al*., 1998). It provides access to wider networks which are useful for collaborations and information sharing (Meschitti and Smith, 2017). Mentorship can help women refine their research focus, identify suitable funding sources, and locate and grow research collaborations (Conn *et al*., 2018). Therefore, mentoring clearly supports women academics in making key career decisions.

Mentorship is not only restricted to achieving work goals but also serves as an instrument that fosters wellness in early-career women academics. As such, the mentoring relationship offers advice on personal and professional matters which can minimise burnout (Bullough, 2005), improve self-confidence (Hemmings, 2012) and increase job satisfaction (Perry and Parikh, 2017). Abugre and Kpinpuo (2017) and Miller-Friedman *et al*. (2018) find that compared to non-mentored academics, academics who participate in mentorship programmes, experience higher levels of productivity, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. Therefore, mentorship is essential for career development (Fleming *et al*., 2015), which includes successive and systematic changes towards progression in a mentee's professional development (White *et al*., 1992). Mentorship is also essential for personal development (well-being, self-efficacy, confidence, self-esteem, psychological empowerment, assertiveness, and problem-solving) (Jeffers and Mariani, 2017); academic craftsmanship (proficiency in academic teaching, research, writing, publication and grant writing) (Varkey *et al*., 2012); and psychological support (encouragement, motivation, confidence, assertiveness, a sense of caring, inspiration and guidance) (Chung and Kowalski, 2012; Welch *et al*., 2012). Therefore, mentoring not only provides behaviours that are needed for achieving success in a field but offers professional guidance and support, advice, and information.

Mentorship Models in Higher Education Institutions

Mentorship is an interactive, supportive process that promotes learning and development based on educational and social learning theories (Gagliardi *et al*., 2014). Although the nature of mentoring typically revolves around a more experienced and knowledgeable person providing some form of support to a novice, there is wide variation in how mentorship goals are implemented in mentoring programmes through mentorship models.

Mentorship models range from formally assigned mentor-mentee relationships that provide a prototype for interactions to informal mentorship outside of formal organisational programmes. Through formal mentorship models, mentors and mentees are usually matched or assigned by someone else, and these relationships do not develop naturally and may not completely meet the needs of the mentee (Khatchikian *et al*., 2021). In contrast, informal mentoring relationships are unstructured and occur without the use of organised recruitment, mentor training and matching services (Khatchikian *et al*., 2021; Huderson *et al*., n.d.). The mentorship relationship develops naturally and organically as opposed to formally assigned mentor relationships (Khatchikian *et al*., 2021; Huderson *et al*., n.d.). In this regard, mentees and mentors may choose one another through informal mentoring based on personality compatibility or other factors (Khatchikian *et al*., 2021). For both formal and informal mentoring relationships, positive mentoring experiences are often reported (Tam-Seto and Imre-Millei, 2022: 16).

Although a variety of models may be used in HEIs during mentorship, this section discusses some of these as well as the most prominently used models for mentoring women in HEIs. These models used for mentoring women include the Apprentice model, Dyad mentorship model, Adaptive mentorship model, Collaborative model, E-mentoring model, Inter-generational mentoring model, Bifocal approach model, Networking or Group Mentoring model, and the Peer group mentoring model. Some of these models apply a dyad mentorship approach but also lend themselves to non-dyadic approaches, and we discuss them without implying that these are the only effective mentorship models. A dyad mentorship approach implies a relationship between a mentor and a mentee whereas non-dyad models include a mentor with multiple mentees or a mentee with multiple mentors.

i. Apprentice model

In HEIs mentoring is traditionally carried out through the Apprentice model (Dhunpath, 2018: 79). In this model a novice or inexperienced person is paired with an experienced faculty or staff member to facilitate transfer of learning, with the expectation that opportunities for professional development will arise (Dhunpath, 2018: 79). Mentoring that occurs through this model is seen as important to developing and achieving staff and faculty career objectives (Dhunpath, 2018: 79). This model is characterised by, amongst others, learning through observation, learning through imitation, or emulating of the mentor, participation in a community of practice, professional identity, and by evaluating the quality of the work through practice (Samkange, 2015: 525). An example is when a novice or newly appointed academic works alongside a senior academic to present a specific course or module at a later stage with the intention that the senior academic should transfer knowledge about the specific field of expertise to the novice. This makes the Apprentice model, as a dyadic approach, relevant to support the professional trajectory of early-career black women academics who consider themselves to be a novice in certain areas of their professional development or who are newly appointed.

ii. Dyad mentorship model

The Dyad model pairs a mentee with a more knowledgeable mentor and is the most traditional model of mentorship (Nowell, 2022: 2). With this model, mentoring relationships can be formal or informal, assigned by a department or institutional programme or emanate from the mentors or mentees themselves. The success of Dyad mentoring relationships lies in the active participation of both the mentor and mentee, who equally share the responsibility of achieving mentorship goals (Nowell, 2022: 2). This mentoring relationship facilitates opportunities to discuss challenges and opportunities for professional learning and development (Nowell, 2022: 2). The significance of this model in the context of this research, is the dedicated support that an early-career black women academic would gain through a mentor that co-plans and co-designs their professional development goals and actions towards its achievement. The co-responsibility of the mentor and mentee also ensures that black women in a Dyad mentorship relationship would gain confidence in her own abilities as the mentorship journey progresses. In the context of this research, this model remains significant and relevant to support early-career black women academics through a formal mentorship relationship.

iii. Adaptive mentorship model

With the Adaptive mentorship model, mentors adapt their mentoring responses to the development stage or level of their mentees while mentoring them (Hunter *et al*., 2022: 36). To achieve this, the mentor assesses the ability of the mentee to achieve certain mentorship goals, develops an understanding of the mentee's abilities, and adapts mentoring based on the needs and abilities of the mentee (Hunter *et al*., 2022: 36). The Adaptive mentorship model is versatile in how it is applied by a mentor to support a mentee. For this research, the relevance of this model is how each mentee through a dyadic approach receives support that is designed to support the career stage that they are at or professional development needs that should be met.

iv. Collaborative model

Collaborative mentorship models are mentee-centred and unlike models that adopt a top-down institutional-based approach and one-on-one approach, shift to a more independent mentee-centred approach (Bung, 2015: 197). Through this model, and as aligned with their specific needs, mentees find their own networks of contacts that will serve in a mentoring capacity. Thus, a network of different developmental mentoring relationships emanates, compared to traditional dyad mentoring relationships. Advantages of this model, which comprises mentoring in groups and networks, are improved communication, knowledge acquisition, career advancement, cultural understanding, and reduced feelings of isolation (Bung, 2015: 197). Of significance about this model is the role of the mentee in taking initiative and ownership for their professional development and career advancement by identifying their own networks of mentors. As such, this network of mentors can support the mentee in various capacities, but their selection requires the mentee to be strategic in terms of the support required from each mentor. What distinguishes this model from the rest is that its non-dyadic nature gives the mentee access to their own network of mentors. In the context of this research non-dyadic models of mentorship are of particular relevance where institutional human resources are limited to provide dyadic mentorship models. Moreso, it supports the establishment of professional linkages towards the professional development of the mentee.

v. E-mentoring model

The E-mentoring model introduces a new setting to the traditional face-to-face mentoring relationship between the mentor and mentee through online or virtual platforms (Mullen, 2016: 135). Through this model, the interaction between a mentor and mentee (dyadic) can be entirely virtual or be a combination of virtual and in-person engagements (Mullen, 2016: 135). The mentorship relationship within this model can be formally established through a mentorship programme or informal where the relationship develops (Neely *et al*., 2017). Apart from the fact that this model of mentorship is increasingly practical in contemporary HEIs and the 21st century, it posits benefits for HEIs and women academics. The benefit of this model for HEIs is grounded in connecting mentees with mentors beyond institutional or national boundaries without the limitations of face-to-face meetings. Computer-mediated communication enables academic institutions to provide mentoring at any time. For this research, the relevance and value of E-mentoring is the potential that it presents to women academics to grow their professional network and tap into skills beyond their limited institutional boundaries.

vi. Intergenerational mentoring model

Through the Intergenerational mentoring model, mentorship occurs outside of the confines of the traditional mentor-mentee relationship's hierarchical structure (Satterly *et al*., 2018: 446). This model enables different faculty to make formal and informal connections that will aid towards achieving professional goals (Satterly *et al*., 2018: 446). In HEIs, its constantly changing staff composition results in an intergenerational staff profile with divergent skills, development and support needs that should be considered in the creation of mentorship support. This composition would comprise a combination of early-career and senior as well as retiring academics. Of significance about intergenerational mentoring, which occurs between and across different generations, is that the norm of the mentor being older is not always the case. Thus, intergenerational mentoring transcends this conventional mentorship norm and instead focuses on the learning, skills transfer and competencies that are shared across different generations. In the context of this research intergenerational mentoring is fundamental in contemporary HEIs to support capacity building and succession planning and could follow dyadic or non-dyadic mentorship approaches.

vii. Bifocal approach model

The Bifocal approach model as a feminist intervention strategy emphasises individual and organisational development (de Vries and van den Brink, 2016: 433). With a dual focus on the individual and organisation, individual understanding of gender differences is fostered as critical to achieving organisational change. Through gendered organisational change, individual women's personal development is transformed through programmes aimed at developing women (de Vries and van den Brink, 2016: 433). For this research, the relevance of this model is premised on the challenge for black women academics at South African HEIs who still lag in terms of career progression and their representation in leadership positions compared to their male counterparts. Mentorship programmes that are specifically earmarked to support early-career black women's academics are therefore essential. Whilst this approach could have an exclusive focus on women the structure of a mentorship programme could be dyadic as well as non-dyadic or a combination of these approaches.

viii. Networking or group mentoring model

Several scholars highlight the importance of moving away from the traditional one-to-one dyadic mentoring model toward group or network mentoring, in which mentees are grouped and have access to multiple mentors (Meschitti and Smith, 2017: 180). This model addresses challenges related to the structural absence of women academics at a senior level who can serve as mentors for early-career women academics (Meschitti and Smith, 2017: 180). Group and networking models promote diversity in ideas, knowledge, and insights amongst mentees (Ilieva, 2020: 22). Whilst this model allows mentees to share their experiences and knowledge with others, the mentees receive support and guidance from a variety of mentors related to their professional development (Ilieva, 2020: 22). Compared to dyadic mentorship models, the Networking or Group Mentoring models have gained much prominence in contemporary HEIs and the 21st century. In this regard, formal mentoring programmes that academics can apply for at HEIs may be resourced to provide mentorship support across various professional development and career advancement areas.

ix. Peer group mentoring model

Kroll *et al*. (2022) assert that women have historically been excluded from traditional dyadic mentoring relationships and development opportunities. During ~~p~~eer group mentoring, which can take place through networks, many of the problems associated with traditional dyadic mentoring – such as a lack of available mentors and homophily – is avoided (Cassese and Holman, 2018: 2). Like traditional mentorship models, ~~p~~eer mentoring promotes professional career development and academic productivity in a variety of ways indirectly and directly (Cassese and Holman, 2018: 2). Indirect ways include expert and peer advice as well as social support; direct ways facilitate discipline-specific feedback, goal setting and accountability (Cassese and Holman, 2018: 2). Peer group mentoring provides women academics with a safe space to express themselves and invaluable learning opportunities (Cassese and Holman, 2018: 2). In the context of this research, ~~P~~eer group mentoring as a non-dyadic mentorship approach could support new appointees to transition in their work environment. Moreover, ~~p~~eer group mentoring plays an important role in providing continuous formal and informal support pertaining to professional development and career advancement amongst new appointees but also senior academics. Other benefits may include the building of relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds with the potential for research and other collaborations.

Against this background, of significance is the move from dyadic models of mentorship such as Apprentice, Adaptive, Bi-focal and E-mentoring models to non-dyadic models such as Collaborative, Networking or Peer group mentoring. Notably, mentorship models such as the Bifocal model could have a dyadic or non-dyadic focus or a combination of both. Significantly these mentorship models illustrate how the transformation of mentorship is no longer exclusively located on an experienced older mentor and an inexperienced mentee. What research demonstrates is that mentorship has evolved from dyadic models to mentorship relationships embedded in co-learning amongst peers, groups, and multiple generations. In the various models, it is also clear that the responsibility or co-responsibility of successful mentorship does not lie exclusively with the contribution of mentors, but also with the mentee and the institution.

Mentorship Support for Women Academics at South African Universities

The South African higher education sector comprises 26 recognised public universities that is geographically

distributed across the country's nine provinces (Universities South Africa, 2023). The website of each of the 26 recognised public universities in South Africa was searched for information on women's mentorship programmes and activities at each institution. Institutional search engines vary in quality; hence this search was performed through Google by using the search string "women's mentorship" and the URL of the institutional website for each of the 26 institutions. Subsequently, the search results were inspected, selecting only those pages that came from the institutional website and mentioned mentoring activities for women academics.

Of the 26 South African public universities, eight mention mentorship programmes and initiatives specifically aimed at supporting women academics. However, in most cases, the information presented on the institutional websites is in the form of articles that describe activities but do not give any indication of how to become part of the mentorship programme, whom to reach out to, or what the application processes may be. At most of these institutions, the programmes appear to not be institutionally-driven (top-down), but rather stemming from the efforts of individual researchers who apply for grants and launch programmes on their own initiative – a "grassroots" bottom-up approach. Some of these initiatives are large and well-funded, stemming from multi-institutional collaborations, such as the University of Zululand's Women Researchers in Humanities and Social Sciences (WoRiHSS) programme and the Mountain-to-Mountain women's mentorship programme at the University of the Free State (led by this paper's third author) (University of the Free State, 2023; University of Zululand, 2023). However, even well-funded programmes do not necessarily have a long-term footprint if they are driven by individual academics or research funding.

Only three of the 26 South African universities have clear information on women's mentorship programmes on their institutional websites, suggesting official institutional support and endorsement. Of these institutions, the University of Johannesburg, University of Limpopo, and the University of Witwatersrand, have websites that indicate how academics may apply to their mentorship programmes, as well as the benefits and leadership structures of these programmes (University of Johannesburg, 2023; University of Limpopo, 2023; University of Witwatersrand, 2023). The nature of these programmes varies from structured learning programmes at the University of Johannesburg to a combination of learning, networking, and research opportunities at the University of Witwatersrand's Female Academic Leaders Fellowship. What distinguishes these three institutions from others is the clear longevity of their programmes and the visibility that institutional support, such as endorsement by the chancellor, brings to the mentorship initiatives.

Methodology

Through an interpretivist paradigm, the adopted methodology was underpinned by a qualitative research approach and design to collect and analyse data. Using this approach, a narrative literature review is provided based on content analysis of literature, both peer-reviewed and non-reviewed. This approach involved the deductive analysis of the content of documents about relevant research concerning mentorship models, modalities, and mentorship programmes. By using a range of electronic search engines, the concepts of mentorship models, modalities, women's mentorship, mentorship programmes, and mentorship initiatives were applied respectively as search terms and adapted as required to identify research that could be included in a narrative literature review. From this content analysis of documents, the topic was explored which informed the development of a conceptual framework. Against this background Table 1 outlines the adopted methodology and the three-stage design is discussed in the rest of this section.

Table 1: Adopted methodology

1. Qualitative research approach		
2. Qualitative research design		
3. Design stages		
(i)Theoretical **stage**	Case study stage	(iii) **Conceptual framework**
Research question: What could be a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics at South African universities?		
4. Data collection methods		
	Relevance	**Protocol**
Literature	Presents past and current research in a field.	• Apply the research concepts of mentorship models, modalities, women's mentorship, and mentorship programmes, and mentorship initiatives as search terms to demarcate the literature search.

		• Analyse the literature. • Summarise the findings.
Case study	Presents evidence regarding the phenomenon that is explored.	• Apply the research concepts of mentorship models, modalities, women's mentorship, and mentorship programmes, and mentorship initiatives as search terms to demarcate the search. • Search the websites of the 26 recognised South African public universities. • Analyse the data. • Summarise the findings.

Source: Author

The first theoretical stage of this qualitative research design involved conducting a literature review and mapping data sources using the demarcated search terms. From this stage, section two of this study presents evidence about the significance of mentorship for women academics, and section three discusses mentorship models in higher education institutions. The second case-study stage explored mentorship programmes and initiatives specifically aimed at supporting women academics at the 26 South African public universities. This exploration considered programmes and initiatives as available on the websites of the universities until January 2023. The findings from this stage informed the development of a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics in the third design stage.

A Conceptual Framework for Mentorship Support to Early Career Women Academics

Beyond the mentoring relationship, mentoring is fundamental towards achieving goals underpinning university excellence, managing, and retaining talent, developing a professional workforce, as well as developing leadership. A combination of the right mentorship models, strategy, money, and effort is therefore critical to the success of formal mentorship programmes at universities. Of further importance is research regarding the intersectionality, diverse experiences, and historical context of early-career black women academics that should underscore formal mentorship programmes at HEIs. Considering this, through a conceptual framework, this section makes recommendations for the formalising of mentorship programmes at South African universities through a conceptual framework for mentorship support to women academics. These recommendations are considered through formal programmatic approaches that contribute to the professional development of early-career black women academics. These recommendations follow a cyclical seven-stage approach from when an early-career black woman enters the university and progresses through different promotions levels to being appointed in leadership positions.

Stage 1: Enculturation and induction of new appointees through mentorship

Stage 1 prioritises the appointment of an "on-boarding" mentor for newly appointed early-career black women academics as part of the formal on-boarding processes in academic departments. At universities, the human resources or skills development departments in collaboration with academic heads of departments could facilitate the appointment of a mentor once the offer of appointment has been accepted by the appointee. The appointment of a mentor this early in a newly-appointed black women academic's journey posits various benefits from an institutional and individual perspective. From an institutional perspective, a dedicated "on-boarding" mentor is part of the induction and enculturation experience of the mentee into institutional processes and the organisational culture. This mentor, in addition to an academic head of department, is instrumental in identifying career and professional development areas that the mentee will need support and assistance with. From an individual perspective, mentees do not become isolated and disengaged during the process of transitioning into their new work environment. At the end of this enculturation process, the role of the "on-boarding" mentor terminates, and a new mentor could be appointed that supports the mentee's career pathing and development. Inherent to this stage is consideration of the nuances of diverse experiences (personal background, discipline, career stage) as well as intersectionality (identity, race, gender) that could affect the mentoring experience of these early-career black women academics when appointing a mentor. Hence pairing of an "on-boarding" mentor and mentee should be embedded in research that considers the mentioned nuances.

Stage 2: Career pathing through mentorship

Mentorship should be inherent to the career pathing of all early-career black women academics given nuances of

intersectionality historical context, diverse experiences, and power dynamics. It is also these nuances that should inform the appointment of a mentor in line with the discipline and or research focus area of the mentee during stage 2. As such, this stage prioritises the diverse experiences of black women academics, in terms of factors such as the discipline in which they work and their career stage. Thus, additional to supporting mentees in finding their feet in a new academic environment (stage 1), mentors who are appointed to support career pathing play an important role in helping their mentees transition into their academic role. Determining the current trajectory of the mentee's career path, this role of the "career pathing" mentor would encompass identifying professional and skills development areas towards career growth and pathing. In liaison with the academic head of the department where the mentee is appointed, the mentor provides recommendations and inputs regarding support that should be provided by academic departments to a new appointee. As part of formal reports about the mentorship relationship, such recommendations should be aligned with the mentee's individual development plan and the performance management system of the university.

Stage 3: A professional trajectory through mentorship

The professional trajectory of a mentee's academic career often relies on the support of mentors who assist with facilitating opportunities required by mentees to address promotion criteria. At this stage, mentorship is grounded in professional support related to overcoming challenges of a historical context such as access to opportunities, support, and resources with consideration of the mentee's career path. Moreover, this mentor supports the mentee to establish their professional profile and standing in their discipline as well as among local and international audiences. The "professional" mentor is therefore fundamental to the mentee's journey of progressing towards and through different levels of promotion. As such, at different promotion levels for a mentee, a different mentor may be part of this journey. The discourse of the mentee's professional trajectory thus requires a mentor who can assist with addressing career growth and achieving career objectives. During stage 3, either the mentor from stage 2 can continue to support the professional trajectory of the mentee through the facilitation of opportunities, or a new mentor can be appointed. At this stage, the institution can also make different mentors available that will support a mentee with different development areas.

Stage 4: Mentorship through peer and intergenerational networks

To complement traditional one-to-one dyadic mentoring, the purpose of stage 4 is to enhance the mentee's professional development through non-dyadic and informal networking mentorship amongst peers and different generations. This is prudent for the mentee to establish mentoring networks, whether formal or informal, beyond dyadic mentoring. The integration of peer and intergenerational networks as part of mentoring, supports new appointees with transitioning into their new work environment. Moreover, it creates opportunities for learning among peers and different generations.

Stage 5: Leadership through mentorship

Opportunities for black women academic mentees to move into leadership positions in universities should be supported with some form of mentorship. As part of institutional leadership development, this could be achieved by creating opportunities for these women to work with established academics who are in leadership positions, whether from research, academic or administrative perspective. During this stage, the institution should explore and earmark opportunities for professional leadership development that create opportunities for mentees to work in such capacities. At this stage, a "leadership" mentor is appointed that assists with overcoming challenges of marginalisation from a power dynamics and historical context and supports the mentee to excel in leadership positions where she is appointed.

Stage 6: Mentoring through mentorship development

The success of a mentorship relationship equally relies on the efforts of both the mentor and mentee. However, the support that a mentor can provide is of significance to the achievement of the mentorship goals. Institutional support often leans more towards supporting and providing development opportunities for mentees with less support for developing mentors' capacity. The establishment of an institutional mentor support programme will place mentors in a better position to provide support to mentees, locate development opportunities for mentees, and support the professional trajectory of mentees.

Stage 7: Evaluation for impact

During, and at the end of the mentorship programme cycle, its impact should be assessed. Evaluation of the programme should take place in partnership with mentees and mentors who participate in the programme. Fundamental to evaluation is to measure the successes, shortcomings, lessons learnt and recommendations towards improving the programme.

Against this background, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for mentorship support to women academics and Figure 2 presents the practical implications for operationalising the framework.

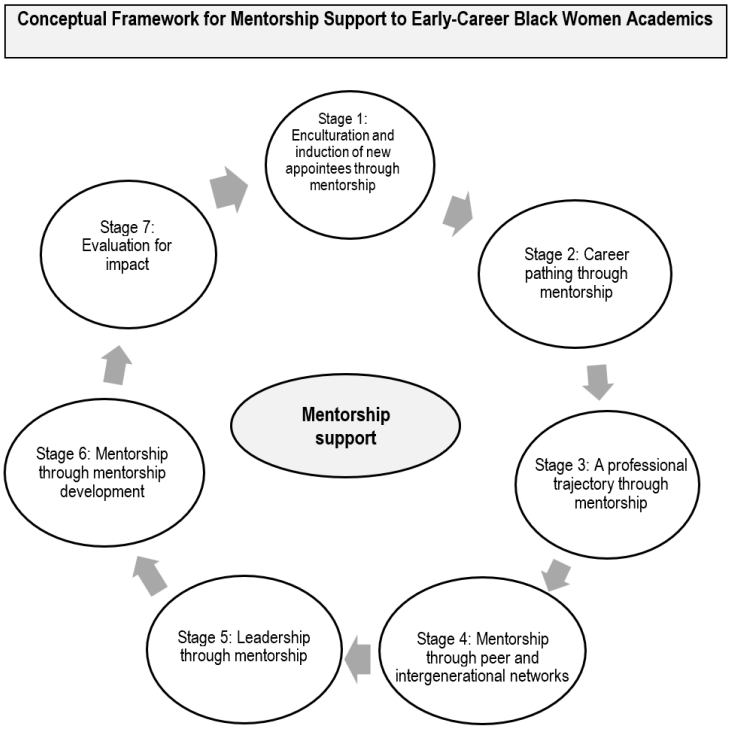

Figure 1: A conceptual framework for mentorship support to women academics
Source: Authors

Operationalising a Conceptual Framework for Mentorship Support to Early-Career Black Women Academics		
Step 1: Research Delineate the nature of support required by early-career black women academics. Determine the scope of current support programmes. Identify the support gap to early-career black women academics.	Step 2: Develop and adopt an institutional mentorship strategy Through a needs analysis direct the nature and support that will be provided. Lead by the relevant deputy vice-chancellor, and developed by the resources department, consultation with faculties, academic departments, unions, employed women black academics, and other stakeholders from the university community.	Step 3: Develop and implement a mentorship programme Informed by the mentorship strategy. Managed by a dedicated department of an HEI. Developed with the inputs of the same stakeholders who were part of developing the strategy.

Figure 2: Operationalising a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics
Source: Authors

Conclusion

This study explored a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics at South African universities. The research question posed was: What could be a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics at South African universities? This aim was achieved, and the research question was answered by discussing (i) the significance of mentorship for women academics (ii) various mentorship models applied in higher education institutions, as well as (iii) results and the discussion of

mentorship support for women academics at South African universities. Against this background and the findings, recommendations were proposed concerning a conceptual framework for mentorship support to women academics. This article argued that the significance of mentorship to women is vested in (i) increasing the number of women academics in leadership positions, (ii) mentoring relationships that provided guidance for professional and psychological support, (iii) assisting, supporting, and guiding women academics in their career trajectory, and (iv) fostering wellness in early career women academics through advice on personal and professional matters. In this regard, a variety of models used in HEIs during women mentorship were considered such as the Bifocal approach model, Networking or Group Mentoring model, and the Peer group mentoring model.

The findings illustrate that mentorship programmes at South African universities are not necessarily offered as part of formal programmes but rather driven by individuals or researchers at these institutions. Moreover, these programmes posit support activities that might not exist. Against the background of these findings, the study recommends a conceptual framework for mentorship support to early-career black women academics. These recommendations include mentorship which supports: 1) the enculturation and induction of new appointees; 2) clear career pathing; 3) assistance in developing a professional trajectory; 4) leadership development; 5) establishment of peer and intergenerational networks; and 6) mentoring through mentorship development, and 7) evaluation for impact. Limitations of a study of this nature is threefold. The first limitation is its complete reliance on a literature review of previously published research and studies and the availability of these studies using the selected research methodology. The second limitation is the appropriateness of these studies within the context of the selected inclusion criteria which considered the research phenomenon and South African public universities. A third limitation is the lack of documented empirical research on the phenomenon from a South African public universities' perspective. In light of this, future empirical research is needed as well as research that could test the conceptual framework proposed in this study.

The practical implications emanating from these recommendations are threefold. Firstly, research is vital to (i) delineate the nature of support required by early-career black women academics, (ii) determine the scope of current support programmes, and (iii) identify the gap in support to early-career black women academics. Secondly, the development of a formal mentorship strategy is prudent to direct the nature and support that will be provided to early-career black women academics – support that will be relevant at all career stages. A well-researched needs analysis must inform institutional strategies. Led by the relevant deputy vice-chancellors, such a strategy should be developed by the human resources department, in consultation with faculties, academic departments, unions, employed women black academics, and other stakeholders from the university community. Thirdly, the mentorship strategy of the institution should inform the development of a formal mentorship programme. Such a formal mentorship programme can be developed with the inputs of these same stakeholders who were part of developing the strategy. To conclude, the success of mentorship support to early-career black women academics will only succeed if prioritised at a rectorate level at universities through dedicated financial and human resourcing of the institutional strategy for mentorship.

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