

## Original Research Article

# A phenomenological study of a formalized mentorship program assessing the experiences of undergraduate medical students at the Public Medical University in south Punjab, Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of mentees, or undergraduate medical students, in a mentorship program introduced at a public medical university in south Punjab.

**Methods:** A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed from September 2023 to June 2024. 110 undergraduate students who were part of a purposive sample provided the data. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were carried out using an approved interview guide. The audio recordings of the interviews were appropriately transcribed. Because the data was sensitive, participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. After performing a manual thematic analysis, the authors agreed on the themes and subthemes.

**Results:** Data analysis revealed four themes and ten subthemes. The psychosocial results of the mentorship program, including personal and professional growth and moral, psychological, and emotional support, were well-received by the participants. Mentees described mentors as their finest guides. Mentors also guided on Islam, case studies, and research methods. Mentors help mentees find solutions to their difficulties. The mentees made insightful recommendations on how to improve the current mentoring program. These included scheduling one-on-one mentoring sessions, offering career guidance, employing committed employees, and demanding verbal feedback from mentees assessing their mentors.

**Conclusions:** The structured mentoring program was deemed satisfactory by the majority of mentees. Every medical student's personal and professional development is the main goal of mentoring. Mentees' comments are helpful, but other ways to address personal or professional issues are needed.

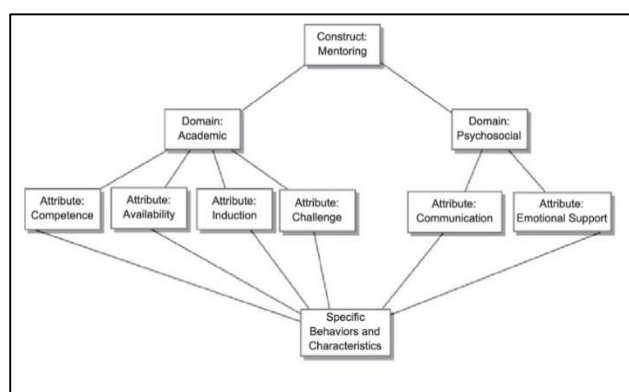
**Keywords:** Medical, Mentoring, Mentors, Students, Undergraduate

## INTRODUCTION

Students who are entering medical schools may experience several difficulties, including emotional immaturity, stress from the demanding medical curriculum, and difficulty adjusting to new environments.<sup>1</sup> Medical students have higher levels of stress than students in other professions.<sup>2</sup> Medical

students' professional and personal development is shaped by mentoring.<sup>3</sup> An active mentor is someone who supports their mentee in realizing their full potential and achieving their objectives in both their personal and professional lives.<sup>4</sup> Students pursuing careers in medicine establish mentoring relationships through clinical placements and research rotations in the absence of an organized mentorship program.<sup>5</sup> The objectives of mentoring and the functions of a mentor are widely varied

in the literature on medical education.<sup>6</sup> However, a lack of program evaluation makes it more difficult to identify mentor and mentee issues, which is essential for managing timely and effective support.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the evaluations must be goal-sensitive, context-specific, and longitudinal.<sup>4</sup> Institutional needs analysis is not being done when structuring formal mentorship programs. Therefore, these programs are uniform for every medical student and do not offer specific strategies or ways to assist problematic students.<sup>7</sup> In the prior study, all mentees were asked about their experiences with the formal mentoring program, which may have influenced student findings.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences of undergraduate medical students and improve mentorship programs by adding student-focused interventions. The study could inspire other medical colleges to implement similar initiatives for the benefit of their students. The mentorship conceptual framework elucidated by Crawford (2012) is given in Figure 1.<sup>9</sup> For students' growth, mentoring is essential in both educational and emotional domains.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1: Schematic model for mentorship.**

## METHODS

A public medical university in Multan carried out a qualitative study from September 2023 to June 2024. Undergraduate medical students were included in the study. With the use of a targeted sample technique, the experiences of students with a mentoring program were thoroughly examined. The primary focus of this study was on the phenomenon of mentorship and how it affects mentees in a certain setting. Before data collection, ethical permission was obtained from the ethics review committee (Ref. No. 18157/NMU, Dated: September 6, 2023). For the selection of mentors, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used.

### Inclusion criteria

All first-year to final-year MBBS and BDS students were included.

### Exclusion criteria

All nursing and allied health science students were in exclusion criteria.

An informed consent form, interview protocols, and validated open-ended questions in the interview guide on mentees' experiences with the formal mentoring program were utilized to collect data. Once the guide was developed, in-context data was collected via personal interviews to reduce remembering bias. Interviews were conducted by the primary researcher in the Urdu language. Every interview was properly transcribed from audio recordings. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed before the interviews. After that, the transcripts were anonymized and shared for data analysis with additional authors.

## RESULTS

The data was limited to under 500 pages, hence manual thematic analysis was used to identify themes by looking for patterns in the data.<sup>11</sup> The authors first created in vivo analytical codes. After that, subthemes were created by grouping codes, and all writers agreed on both themes and subthemes. After thematic analysis, 4 themes and 10 subthemes are formed (Table 1). A large number of participants were female and mostly came from the clinical years (Table 1). The study investigated mentees' experiences with a mentoring program that was launched at a public medical university in Multan. The mentorship program, which consisted of official mentoring meetings every two weeks, was in charge of handling student issues and assigning psychologists to the institute for counseling sessions. Four main themes and ten subthemes were developed from the data given in Table 2.

**Table 1: Attributes of research participants (n=110).**

Description	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	45	40.9
Female	65	59.09
<b>Age (years)</b>		
18-20	32	29.09
21-23	40	36.36
24-26	38	34.54
<b>Study year</b>		
First year	22	20
Second year	20	18.18
Third year	15	13.63
Fourth year	15	13.63
Final year	38	34.54

**Table 2: Medical students' experiences as undergraduates (mentees) in the organized mentoring program.**

Subthemes	Mentees' statement
	<b>Theme-1: Psychological impacts of the mentorship program</b>
<b>Strong mentorship connection</b>	<p>"I approached my mentor to talk about my problem because she is an excellent listener and friendly".</p> <p>"The mentoring is determined by the personality of the mentor. My mentor always has a smile on his face".</p>
<b>Ethical, social, and spiritual support</b>	<p>"The benefit of formal mentoring programs is that mentors offer ongoing guidance rather than one-time assistance".</p> <p>"My mom has cancer. I talked with my mentor about how to organize my academic time and get rid of this depression at my friend's recommendation. I am attending the counselling sessions that my mentor has set up for me, and I am getting better."</p>
<b>Individual and professional improvement</b>	<p>"Mentors are there to support students without passing judgment or making fun of them. The mentorship program is providing me with complete support in morals. The director of the mentorship program reminds me a lot of my mother. She frequently offers me encouraging words".</p> <p>"My mentor advised me to find harmony in my social life and profession and to include marrying in my growth objectives. I intend to enrol in OET lessons throughout the summer so that, once I become married, I may continue my job overseas".</p>
	<b>Theme-2: Mentor acting as a source of solutions for the mentee's difficulties</b>
<b>Arranging additional classes and collaborative learning</b>	<p>"My mentor promised to set up a combined study for me in the university after university hours. Then, I could finish my studying before coming home".</p>
	<b>Theme-3: Mentor acting as a counsellor</b>
<b>Conducting research and dealing with challenges</b>	<p>"My mentor scheduled a meeting for me to connect with the president of the scientific society, who gave me advice on different research approaches. I'm now considering the best area to pick".</p> <p>"Our mentor insists that we should engage in patient-related research, which means that we must study the cases we encounter on our hospital rounds".</p>
<b>Counselling regarding Islam</b>	<p>"In addition to teaching us about the outside world, mentors also ask us to commune with Allah and follow deen".</p> <p>"In mentorship conversations, more experienced mentors direct us in the proper direction and eliminate our doubts regarding the Hadith and Quran".</p>
	<b>Theme 4: The requirement of an integrated mentorship program</b>
<b>Students should provide vocal comments regarding mentors</b>	<p>"Effective mentorship requires oral input from students on mentors".</p>
<b>Appointment of skilled and passionate professionals</b>	<p>"I've noticed that the mentorship program needs dedicated, qualified employees. A well-organized staff with a clear job description is needed. Mentors need to be taught to assist mentees in addressing their specific difficulties. They ought to follow up with their mentees as well".</p>
<b>Individualized mentoring is necessary</b>	<p>"Personal mentoring is necessary as a few students find it difficult to discuss their issues in a group setting".</p> <p>"The pupils in this program are not allowed to discuss personal information freely."</p>
<b>Career counselling is necessary</b>	<p>The primary emphasis of mentoring needs to be on areas like career guidance. Guidance on where to prepare for the part-1 test should be given to students right away. Mentors don't help us choose our jobs; they just question us about our plans.</p>

## DISCUSSION

Insightful suggestions provided by mentees to enhance formal mentoring programs have been highlighted in the study along with their experiences with them. For a mentoring relationship to be fruitful, mentees need to have certain expectations fulfilled by their mentors, such as the mentor's capacity to form friendships and provide

customized guidance.<sup>12</sup> Later on, this relationship aids in mentees' professional growth.<sup>13</sup> In this study, mentees expressed satisfaction with the personal traits and emotional support of their mentors. According to one study, mutual trust and respect are the qualities that a mentor should possess.<sup>14</sup> However, the current study does not emphasize this aspect of respect and trust. Regular meetings between mentor and mentee are necessary to

foster a sense of trust.<sup>15</sup> A few emotionally supported mentees had counselling sessions through the study institute's mentorship program, which offered them emotional support. Various strategies may be used to support medical students' well-being, including establishing a favorable learning atmosphere, recognizing and aiding mentees, guiding ways to manage stress, encouraging self-awareness, and assisting students in improving their health.<sup>16</sup> The term "well-being" refers to a student's state of emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health as well as their lack of suffering.<sup>17</sup> One of the mentees was motivated by videos and messages sent by the head of the mentorship program. According to a previous study, mentors used to inspire mentees to attain greater academic success.<sup>18</sup> Medical students go through many stages, and to succeed, they require moral or psychological support. Participants in the University of Wisconsin Medical School's mentor program received psychological help.<sup>19</sup> Mentor roles in another study were to maximize mentees' strengths and reduce their flaws. In the current study, mentors gave mentees advice on the balance between work and life, self-control, and time management, among other professional and personal development topics. A mentorship program prioritizes the development of the full person over the study of academics and clinical skills alone.<sup>20</sup> To support their well-being, students ought to be urged to strike a balance between their personal and professional lives. Along with the studies, this study has brought attention to the advice given to the mentees concerning religion and everyday life. Mentors provide advice to mentees about case-based learning and research techniques. To make it easier for future doctors and scientists to be engaged in research, early support and involvement in the subject should be provided to students.<sup>21</sup> Case-based learning encourages collaboration and teamwork in studies. The official mentorship program at the study location is based on the medical college's objective, which indicates that competent medical students and good practicing Muslims are required. The mentees benefited from the structured mentoring program since it offered answers to their issues. For a mentee who struggled to understand pathology, extra lessons were scheduled, and combined study was organized for a student who was unable to study at home because of obligations and distractions. Study participants offered insightful recommendations for improving the current program, including hiring knowledgeable and dedicated employees, emphasizing the value of oral feedback, career counselling, and personal sessions with mentors. Faculty training should be used to customize formal mentoring programs to the local environment.<sup>22</sup> Uncertain positions within the program and a lack of program expertise were identified as impediments to mentoring in one of the prior research.<sup>14</sup> The primary goal of the mentoring program should be carefully selected to address the challenges that the mentees are facing in the specific environment. Before the mentor gave her advice and advised her to balance her life and profession, one of the participants believed that marriage would hinder her ability to

advance in her career. Career counselling is required to provide students with comprehensive guidance on all potential medical specialties.<sup>23</sup> A small number of mentees in the current study offered recommendations for one-on-one mentoring sessions where they felt comfortable sharing their issues. In contrast to faculty mentoring, which has a time limit, mentees can benefit from vertical peer mentoring, which allows for greater time. Students who struggle academically, belong to underrepresented groups, or are psychologically maladjusted may benefit from individual mentoring.<sup>24</sup> The study has outlined the advantages and disadvantages of the official mentorship program offered by the research center. The mentees' insightful recommendations can be used to enhance the program. To compare mentees' experiences, the study might be carried out at many institutions.

## CONCLUSION

Most mentees expressed satisfaction with the official mentoring program. There is evidence in the literature that a mentoring program can assist medical students in experiencing less psychological suffering. All medical students receive mentoring with an emphasis on their professional and personal growth. When particular techniques or ideas are implemented while keeping in mind the issues experienced by difficult students, mentoring is effective. The study site's mentoring program would benefit from the mentees' insightful recommendations. Moreover, other institutions may benefit from this and adopt student assistance initiatives of their own.

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