Mentoring and Supervision in Academia: Establishing Distinctions to Manage Expectations

DEAR EDITOR,

We read with interest the article entitled "Great Expectations: Principal Investigator and Trainee Perspectives on Hiring, Supervision, and Mentoring" by Kaps et al. We agree that a good mentor–mentee relationship can improve outcomes of academic training and contribute positively to research output; however, we would like to highlight the following:

First, the principal investigator (PI)–trainee relationship is not synonymous with a mentor–mentee relationship. PIs supervise their research trainees, but not all trainees choose their PIs as mentors. There can be many reasons for this, including differences in personality, culture, and sex, to name a few. In pedagogy, there are fundamental differences between mentoring and supervision. One main difference is that supervision is task oriented and assumes a top-down approach, e.g., a PI supervising a trainee's Ph.D. project. In contrast, mentoring involves a more neutral trainee-centered relationship using a predominantly facilitative approach. Such distinctions may not be discernible to trainees or PIs who are not familiar with the process of mentoring and use the term interchangeably. This is not helped by the lack of a universally accepted definition of mentoring[1] because there are different models of mentoring and a multitude of roles a mentor can play. Despite this, one hallmark feature of mentoring is that mentees freely choose their mentors. Trainees may choose a Ph.D. or research project by interest and the potential for success, but they do not have equal freedom to change their PIs or supervisors.

Second, it is normal for trainees to choose mentors outside their research group. Many mentoring programs in universities in the United Kingdom explicitly recommend that mentors should not have any hierarchical associations with potential mentees,[2,3] e.g., supervisor and trainee. Likewise in the United States, postgraduate students in some universities are advised to choose mentors according to best fit.[4,5] Nonetheless, providing formal training in mentoring to aspiring mentors and educating potential mentees about the process allows the calibration and better management of expectations on both sides.

Third, careful consideration is needed when associating the terms trainees, mentees, employees, mentors, supervisor, and PIs with mentoring. It is noteworthy that through the lens of pedagogy and to educationalists, these terms have different implications. This is potentially problematic for this study because PIs were asked for their expectations of employees and not specifically trainees or mentees. The term employee also encompasses non-training members within a PI's group (e.g., laboratory manager, laboratory technician). Similarly, trainees were asked for their expectations of their PI and supervisor and not specifically their mentors. The Likert-type questions also contained a degree of ambiguity and did not target perspectives specifically related to a mentor–mentee relationship. Therefore, it is important to know if the survey was pretested in similar but independent groups and if the validity and reliability were assessed prior to its use in the study.

In summary, we commend the authors for their efforts in investigating the mentor–mentee relationship in academia through this pilot study, but future studies must address the issues discussed above for results to be robust and meaningful. This is undoubtedly an important issue, and we fully support the ongoing trans-Atlantic efforts to further postgraduate education in hepatology.

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