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Lessons from a mentor: Navigating academic life in the contemporary South African university

This paper offers a first-person reflective account of one mentorship relationship, between an emerging health sciences scholar and a senior biostatistician, facilitated by South Africa's Future Professors Programme. Drawing on five lessons from the mentorship – goal-setting, publication planning, the meaning of excellence, research integrity and the ethic of care – we examine how emerging scholars are socialised into the norms of a metric-driven academy, and how a care-oriented, *ubuntu*-inspired mentor can open space for a more substantive understanding of scholarly work. The account is situated within debates on neoliberal and neocolonial academic culture and on mentorship in South Africa and the Global South. We do not evaluate the Future Professors Programme as a whole, but reflect on a single case within one phase of the programme. We argue that the tensions described are features of the contemporary academy more broadly, and ask what it means to become a good scholar, not merely a productive one.

Significance:

Transformation of the South African professoriate is being pursued through the same metrics that historically excluded the scholars it now seeks to develop. Drawing on one mentorship within the Future Professors Programme, this paper shows how this contradiction is transmitted in practice through goal-setting tools, publication plans and promotion criteria absorbed without being chosen. It argues that genuine transformation requires more than demographic change in the professoriate: it requires changing what scholarship is taken to be for. The paper offers implications for mentors, programme designers and the metrics used to assess transformation.

Introduction

South African higher education continues to face the task of building a more representative professoriate while also responding to demands for transformation, decolonisation, research productivity and public accountability.[1,2] National initiatives such as the Future Professors Programme (FPP) have emerged as important spaces for academic development, mentorship and leadership formation.[3] Its purpose of supporting emerging scholars as they prepare for more senior roles is both necessary and urgent.

This paper does not evaluate the FPP as a whole, nor does it claim the features described are representative of all its phases or institutional forms. It offers a reflective account of one mentorship experience within one phase of the programme, growing out of one of the author's (S.S.) participation as a mentee, and explores what that experience reveals about academic life today.

The broader context matters. Across many universities, academic work is increasingly shaped by promotion criteria, rankings, performance indicators, publication targets and audit cultures.[4-6] These conditions are often described as features of the neoliberal university.[7] Yet neoliberalism is sometimes used too broadly, as if every form of planning or ambition were evidence of managerial distortion. Planning publications, managing time and aiming for strong journals may reflect intellectual rigour and disciplinary contribution rather than a neoliberal culture.

In South Africa, these concerns extend beyond neoliberalism. Universities continue to operate within colonial and apartheid legacies: racialised distribution of academic authority, dominance of Northern frameworks, undervaluing of locally relevant knowledge, and ranking metrics not designed for African universities or publics.[4,8-10] Scholars in this tradition argue that the neoliberal university in South Africa is also neocolonial: past inequalities are not merely reproduced but actively reinforced by globally oriented performance systems.[11-13] The professoriate that programmes like the FPP seek to transform is therefore not only under-representative in demographic terms, it has also been shaped to value, measure and aspire to standards often poorly aligned with the needs of South African society.

This paper is guided by one central question: what did this mentorship experience teach me about navigating the demands of academic performance while remaining oriented to scholarly purpose, ethical mentorship and the public good? The question is practical and political: it asks about the relationship between individual academic development and the conditions that define what such development is taken to mean.

Framing the reflection: Context, positionality and limits

This paper is a reflective narrative grounded in lived experience. It is based on one of the author's (S.S.) participation in one phase of the FPP and on a mentoring relationship with a senior biostatistician (L.T.). The account has clear limits: it is not a study of the FPP as a whole, and its phases may differ considerably in structure, ethos and institutional culture. Our intention is to reflect on a single case and consider what it reveals about broader debates.

The argument depends on interpretation. It is one participant's reflection on their development, ambitions and changing understanding of academic work. That subjective position is the basis of the contribution: the paper does not offer a broad empirical generalisation but a situated account of how one emerging scholar made sense of mentorship under contemporary conditions. The paper is therefore not structured around a formal hypothesis. It is a reflective narrative drawing on scholarship on the neoliberal and neocolonial university, mentorship, and *ubuntu* and the public good. While the public good has been previously defined[8,14], we understand it as universities'

contribution to society through three dimensions: generating knowledge that addresses social needs; providing educational access that mitigates inequality and enables social mobility; and producing graduates prepared for active citizenship. In the South African context, this further requires attention to whose knowledge is valued and whose interests are served.

The contemporary academy: Neoliberal and neocolonial legacies

The neoliberal restructuring of the academy

Over three decades, higher education has undergone substantial restructuring. Universities worldwide have adopted corporate management, performance-based funding and market-oriented accountability, altering the conditions of academic work.[4,7,15] Consequences are well documented: intensified workloads, casualisation of junior labour, administrative colonisation of scholarly time, and reduction of academic identity to measurable outputs.[1,13,16,17] Publication counts, citation metrics, journal quartile rankings and grant income have become the dominant currencies of academic worth, measurable and therefore manageable, if not reliable, indicators of quality.[4,5,13,18] It is important to be precise. Critics of metric-driven academic culture are not arguing against the evaluation of scholarship. Assessing research quality, recognising intellectual contribution and selecting rigorous work for publication are legitimate activities that predate contemporary performance management. What is at stake is the treatment of proxy measures as ends in themselves, the displacement of substantive judgements by rankings, the distortion of research agendas by strategic output pursuit, and the undervaluing of applied, community-engaged and teaching-intensive work that resists quantification.[4,5,15,18] These distortions are real, but distinct from strategic academic practice as such.

Neocoloniality and the South African university

In South Africa, this critique must be read alongside colonial and apartheid legacies. The contemporary academy was built on decades of racialised exclusion that shaped who could be a scholar and what standards of excellence applied. The democratic transition transformed access but did not dismantle the architecture of academic value.[1,8,19] The sector has expanded demographically while reproducing past epistemic hierarchies.

South African decolonial scholarship argues that adopting global rankings, Northern methodologies and internationally indexed journals as primary measures of quality constitutes neocolonial knowledge governance.[9-11] Black academics may face a double burden: they are required to demonstrate excellence within institutional systems not designed around their histories and intellectual locations, while also carrying invisible labour that those systems rarely reward.[1] Heleta and Dilraj[10] further argue that decolonisation in South African higher education has often functioned as rhetoric more than structural transformation, with neoliberal and Eurocentric logics still shaping institutional priorities.

The FPP operates within this context. Established in 2020 by the Department of Higher Education and Training, it addresses South Africa's shortage of black and women professors, particularly in the natural sciences, health sciences and engineering.[2,3] Its intentions are necessary. Yet the indicators it uses to measure success, such as publication rates, promotion and research output, are largely the same ones that have historically been used to exclude the scholars it now seeks to develop. This tension between transformative purpose and metric assessment is one of the pressures that shaped the mentorship described below.

The Future Professors Programme: Structure and purpose

The FPP is a multi-component programme designed to accelerate the advancement of emerging academics toward full professorship.[3] It combines formal mentorship – each participant is paired with a senior professor – with life coaching, leadership seminars and exposure to academic networks. Monthly mentor–mentee meetings form the backbone, supported by cohort workshops, peer learning and an international research visit.

The design recognises that the journey to professorship involves not only scholarly outputs but also leadership capacity, institutional knowledge and professional identity. The life-coaching component acknowledges that barriers are not only those in producing research, but are often personal, such as navigating institutional politics, managing competing obligations and building professional confidence to form scholars ready to lead institutions and communities.

Mentorship in higher education: What the literature tells us

Global perspectives on academic mentorship

Mentorship is a key mechanism of professional development in higher education.[20-22] High-quality mentoring is linked to career advancement, productivity, self-efficacy and the development of professional identity.[23,24] Structured programmes support early-career academics in publishing, securing funding, building networks and navigating institutional cultures opaque to those without social capital.[25,26]

The literature has also grown attentive to the limits of traditional models. The dyadic model, where one senior mentor guides one junior mentee, has been criticised for reproducing hierarchies.[27,28] It places the burden of adaptation on junior scholars rather than on the institutions poorly designed to support them.[28] Alternatives like mentoring circles, peer mentoring and group coaching have been proposed to distribute mentorship more equitably and build communities of practice.[21]

Mentorship also occurs within institutional environments shaped by performance pressures and metric-driven promotion criteria. Mentors' advice is inevitably shaped by what those environments reward, so mentorship can itself transmit norms that prioritise career advancement over scholarly purpose.[28,29]

Mentorship in the South African and African context

The South African mentorship literature has grown rapidly, driven by concern about the professoriate's demographic profile.[1,30,31] Studies have documented the particular challenges facing black and women academics in South African universities: isolation, limited access to senior networks, the burden of additional obligations (including the expectation of extensive community engagement and administrative service) that are rarely fully acknowledged in performance assessments, and the experience of navigating institutional cultures that were not designed with their participation in mind.[1,32-34]

Research on mentorship in African universities highlights both the potential and the limits of structured programmes in resource-constrained settings. A Tanzanian health-sciences study found mentees reported positive experiences and gains in publications, doctoral enrolment and grants.[35] Yet some reported dissatisfaction with relationship quality and training. Sustainable mentorship requires institutional commitment and a culture of shared investment in junior scholars – qualities that are not always present in competitive environments.[36] These findings resonate with our experience and with the *ubuntu* literature addressed below.

Mentorship models developed in Northern contexts may not translate well to institutions with different histories, resources and social obligations.[37] For South African emerging scholars, advice, however well intentioned, may be shaped by Northern assumptions about successful careers. The FPP's effort to provide locally grounded mentorship may be a response to this challenge.

The mentorship: An overview

S.S. was introduced to L.T. through the FPP's mentor-matching process after finding direct approaches to senior scholars more difficult than anticipated. Several declined, citing the administrative burden of the programme's documentation: annual reports, accountability forms and progress records, an early encounter with audit culture working against its own stated purposes.

L.T. is a distinguished biostatistician with a prolific research record and extensive mentoring history across the health sciences. From the outset, he spoke of his own mentors and of his responsibility to pass investment forward – a framing that set the tone throughout.

The mentorship unfolded through monthly virtual meetings, email exchanges and document reviews. S.S. set agendas; L.T. responded to

manuscripts, strategy questions and uncertainties about the academic S.S. was becoming. The FPP provided scaffolding; the substance was shaped by the relationship and by the questions the academy kept raising for both of us. The lessons that follow are organised around five themes, not as neatly separable in practice, each illuminating what the contemporary academy asks of emerging scholars.

Lesson one: On goals, time and what gets counted

One of L.T.'s first exercises was asking S.S. to articulate written goals across research, teaching, community engagement and personal development, and to link them to his institution's promotion criteria. It felt bureaucratic but proved revealing: it forced S.S. to see where he was actually spending his time versus where he thought he was spending his time, and how much energy he was expending in activities that were neither professionally advancing nor personally meaningful.

L.T.'s observation that "being busy does not necessarily equate to productivity or success" was illuminating. The academy generates busyness in meetings, committees and administration, but less readily protects the slower work of thinking and writing. L.T.'s insistence that writing time be guarded and work be organised around substantive outputs proved effective: within a year, a paper S.S. had been struggling with was accepted by a well-regarded journal.

Yet, on reflection, the exercise raised questions it did not answer. The promotion criteria that anchored it were themselves products of the metric regime: publications in indexed journals, citation counts, supervision of postgraduate students and grant income.

These matter particularly in South Africa. The benchmarks were not neutral: they privilege internationally indexed publications, citations from Northern networks and competitive grant income, advantaging well-resourced institutions, dominant languages and fields with large international research communities. For an emergency-medicine researcher in South Africa, meeting the standards of the field requires not only scholarly quality but also a strategic orientation toward the global academy.[38] The exercise was useful, but it also introduced assumptions about success that warranted examination rather than simple acceptance.

L.T. was not unaware of this tension. He was explicit that 'playing the game', securing the title and meeting the benchmarks was a precondition for the freedom to do work that mattered most: earn the position, then use it. Sensible advice, but it assumes the values deferred during the climb survive the ascent intact. Habits of mind formed over years of metric-focused work have their own momentum.

Lesson two: Publication planning and scholarly project management

A concrete output of the mentorship was a personal publication plan – a document that maps current and planned manuscripts, timelines, target journals and submissions. L.T. offered it as a tool for strategic self-management, to maintain a productive pipeline while staying true to research coherence. It proved useful: it revealed gaps, surfaced stalled manuscripts and clarified relations between projects. Yet what it produced was less an intellectual map of questions than a production schedule; research appeared primarily as raw material for the pipeline. At the same time, the mentorship consistently emphasised methodological rigour and sustained engagement with substantive research questions, indicating that publication planning functioned as one element of a broader scholarly practice rather than as an end in itself.

Metric culture works most effectively not through explicit instruction but through the tools it offers and the categories they invite. The publication plan is as much the system's tool as the scholar's; in adopting it, one becomes a project manager of one's own intellectual life.

Lesson three: Excellence and what it actually means

'Excellence' appeared frequently in our conversations, both in the FPP's framing and in broader institutional discourse. The concept was both motivating and elusive. With L.T.'s guidance, S.S. improved his scholarship, argument structure, clarity of expression, and articulation of the key message. When S.S.'s first paper was accepted by a highly ranked journal, he felt it was a genuine achievement, not a hollow milestone. Publication signifies peer-assessed quality and increases the likelihood that the relevant community will encounter the work. That is not reducible to metrics; it reflects substantive scholarly judgement of the kind peer review is designed to make.

And yet Readings[18] argues that 'excellence' can operate as an empty signifier when detached from substantive ideals. The risk in this case was asking whether the work was good enough for a highly ranked journal rather than whether it addressed the right question – two inquiries that are related but not identical. Positioning within rankings is answerable and anxiety-inducing; intellectual contribution and social relevance are slower and less amenable to pipeline planning.

L.T. modelled a richer understanding of excellence than the ranking system can capture: one that included rigour, integrity, clarity and a commitment to advancing genuine understanding in a field that serves real patients in real emergencies. His insistence on methodological honesty exemplified a form of scholarly excellence without an obvious metric.

Lesson four: Research integrity as scholarly practice

Among the most significant aspects of the mentorship was L.T.'s engagement with questions of research integrity. He invited me to one of his talks on the ethical complexities involved in decisions to stop clinical trials early, using a specific example from the literature on the Immediate Kangaroo Mother Care clinical trial.[39] The talk examined how such decisions introduce bias, how pressure to demonstrate benefit can distort judgement, and how rigour and participant protection can be held together.

This was not a lesson about rule-following. It concerned the relationship between scientific practice and ethical responsibility: how the pursuit of publishable results can, under institutional pressures, compete with the pursuit of reliable knowledge. In health sciences, where findings may eventually influence clinical practice, this is not abstract.

L.T.'s choice to spend mentorship time on this rather than on more immediately career-relevant topics signalled something about what he thought mentorship was for: not only the transmission of career skills, but the formation of scholarly character. This is the *ubuntu* dimension made concrete; a good mentor helps not merely with success in the system but with becoming a certain kind of person within it.

Lesson five: *Ubuntu* as a mentoring ethic

Running through the lessons was an ethic L.T. articulated explicitly in terms of *ubuntu*. He defined kindness as one of the defining principles of his scholarly life[40], citing Maya Angelou: "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." He described kindness not as softness but as the highest form of leadership, one that builds trust, fosters respect and transforms professional relationships into something approaching community. This was not rhetorical. It was the lived texture of every interaction we had.

He grounded this ethic in *ubuntu* – 'I am because you are' – describing mentorship as an expression of humanity and mutual obligation: a way of returning what had been given to him and of sustaining intellectual generosity across generations.[41-43] He created space for uncertainty, for underdeveloped ideas, and for honest questions about career pressures and the tensions of academic life. The patience with which he engaged with drafts, his willingness to share his own experiences of failure and professional difficulty, and his insistence that S.S. develop his own voice were not incidental courtesies.

L.T. emphasised that these choices were not only ethically important but also beneficial to those involved. He drew on a growing body of evidence suggesting that kindness benefits not only its recipient but also its giver and those who witness it. Research consistently shows that prosocial behaviour improves the psychological and physical well-being of those who practise it, reducing anxiety, boosting mood and increasing a sense of meaning and social connection – effects documented across

cultures and contexts.[44-46] Witnesses experience similar effects: oxytocin release, elevated mood and a heightened disposition to act generously – a phenomenon called moral elevation.[47,48] When a senior scholar models intellectual generosity, the ripple extends outward: to the mentee, to the students the mentee will eventually teach, and to the wider academic culture those students will inhabit.

There are limits to what individual mentors can achieve within constrained environments. L.T.'s *ubuntu* ethic coexisted with advice that helped S.S. navigate the metric regime; the mentor was asked, in effect, to be both caring educator and performance strategist – a dual burden that can be psychologically and professionally demanding. The tension between care-oriented mentorship and productivity-oriented strategy was not always resolved; often it was simply held. Individual mentors can model alternative values and create spaces of intellectual generosity, but they cannot restructure the systems within which those spaces exist.

What these lessons reveal about academic socialisation

Stepping back, the striking feature of our experience is how unreflective it was at the time. The goal-setting seemed practical, the publication plan sensible, and targeting strong journals obvious. Only later, through engagement with scholarship on neoliberal and neocolonial academic culture and through writing this paper, was it clear that these practices carried a particular vision of academic work that had been absorbed subconsciously.

This is how academic socialisation typically works. It does not operate primarily through explicit instruction; it operates through the tools we are given, the forms we fill in, the benchmarks we are assessed against, and the examples set by the mentors and senior colleagues we are fortunate enough to encounter. The norms of the contemporary metric-driven academy are reproduced less through ideology than through practice, through the daily habits of thought.

This has particular implications for South Africa and for the decolonisation project. Debates about transforming the university and whose knowledges are valued, which standards are applied, and whose interests the academy serves cannot be limited to questions of curriculum content or demographic representation.[9-12] They must engage scholarly socialisation: the norms, values and habits of mind transmitted through mentorship, professional development and the everyday practices of academic life. A transformed professoriate is not simply one that looks different; it must also, over time, think differently about what scholarship is for, whose questions it addresses, and what kinds of contributions count as valuable.

The FPP, concerned with transforming the South African professoriate, has a particular responsibility here. Transformation cannot mean simply producing more professors who perform well within the existing metric regime, although that is a necessary condition for equity of access to the profession. It must also include equipping emerging scholars to think critically about the norms they are being asked to internalise, to recognise the assumptions embedded in the tools they are given, and to sustain a vision of academic life that connects scholarly excellence to social purpose. That is not a luxury; it is central to genuine transformation.

L.T.'s mentorship did not resolve these questions but it kept them alive in a way that purely instrumental mentorship would not have. His *ubuntu* ethic, his investment in research integrity and his insistence on substantive quality over strategic positioning were not curriculum items in any formal sense. They were examples, embodied in a relationship, of a richer understanding of what it means to be a scholar. That, perhaps, is what mentorship at its best can offer: not just the skills to succeed within the system, but the orientation to keep asking whether the system's definition of success is the one that matters.

Implications for policy, practice and future research

Implications for mentorship programme design

These reflections have practical implications for the design and delivery of academic mentorship programmes. The first concerns the balance between instrumental and formative mentorship. Mentorship programmes, including the FPP, tend to be structured around outputs: meeting targets and building career portfolios. These are legitimate and necessary components of professional development. But the experience described here suggests that the most durable and transformative aspects of mentorship are those that cannot easily be documented in an annual progress report: the quality of intellectual engagement, the ethical stance modelled by the mentor, and the creation of a space in which emerging scholars can ask hard questions about the kind of academics they are becoming.

A second implication concerns the training and support of mentors themselves. The qualities that made L.T.'s mentorship distinctive, the *ubuntu* ethic, the investment in research integrity, and the willingness to model uncertainty and professional difficulty are not qualities that can be assumed to be present in senior academics selected as mentors on the basis of their publication records. Mentor development programmes should explicitly attend to the values and relational capacities that underpin effective mentorship, rather than only to the technical knowledge that mentors can transmit. This is especially important in the South African context, where the scholars being mentored may face institutional environments, community expectations and professional pressures that differ significantly from those their mentors navigated in earlier career stages.

At the institutional level, these reflections point toward the need for promotion and recognition frameworks that better reflect the range of scholarly contributions that South African universities need from their academics. The current framework, centred on internationally indexed publications, citation counts and grant income, systematically undervalues community-engaged scholarship, teaching innovation and locally relevant applied research.[49,50] A professoriate oriented primarily toward globally competitive output may be less well positioned to address the pressing social, health and developmental challenges of South African society than one whose incentive structures were better aligned with those challenges.

At the policy level, this paper supports calls for broader conversations within the Department of Higher Education and Training and universities about the metrics used to assess transformation initiatives such as the FPP. If the goal is a professoriate serving South African society, rather than merely performing well in global rankings, the benchmarks should reflect this through supplementary indicators that capture community engagement, knowledge translation, mentorship quality and locally relevant research agendas.

Directions for future research

This article is an account of one mentorship experience. Its contribution is to add experiential texture to a largely theoretical literature, but the questions it raises point to a broader agenda.

Comparative studies across the FPP's different phases and institutional contexts would show whether the tensions identified here between metric-driven planning and scholarly purpose, and between instrumental and formative mentorship, are widely shared, or whether institutional cultures and disciplinary contexts produce meaningfully different experiences.

Longitudinal research following participants from early career into their own mentoring would show whether care-oriented, *ubuntu*-inflected mentorship is reproduced downstream or displaced as scholars advance – a question not yet empirically investigated in South Africa.

Examining mentors' own perspectives, and how they balance obligations to the programme, their institutions and their research, would further enrich the evidence base for programme design.

Finally, research is needed on whether different mentorship models produce scholars who engage differently with the communities their research serves – a question the current metric framework is least equipped to ask.[5,6,16] Developing methodological tools for it is itself a research priority.

Conclusion: Becoming a scholar, not just a professor

One mentorship relationship can illuminate broader questions about scholarly formation in the contemporary South African academy. S.S. learnt practical lessons about goals, publication planning and academic

visibility, but also that these skills are never neutral. Their meaning depends on what they are for, what kinds of scholarship they make possible, and whether they remain connected to integrity, care and public purpose.

The value of the mentorship lay not only in helping to navigate the demands of academic life, but also in keeping open a more difficult question: how to become not merely a productive academic, but a good and kind scholar, who, in time, mentors others in the same spirit. That distinction matters beyond this single case. If the contemporary university too easily collapses success into performance, then mentorship remains one of the few spaces in which scholars can still learn to ask what their work is for, whom it serves and what kind of academic life is worth sustaining.

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There are no data pertaining to this article.

Declarations

We have no AI or LLM use to declare.

Authors' contributions

S.S.: Conceptualisation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. L.T.: Writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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