

Seeking Coaching and Mentoring: An Exploration of Students' Perspectives in HEIs

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ABSTRACT

With the education sector undergoing changes and the labour market putting forward new demands, students in Pakistani HEIs need a support systems comprising coaching and mentoring to navigate the changes. This study explores current practices, perceptions, and challenges of coaching and mentoring within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan from the perspective of undergraduates. A sample of undergraduate students from the STEAM fields were selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the data were analyzed in six phases. The findings revealed that the students faced challenges when transitioning to higher education and university life. The study concludes with the acknowledgement that there is a need for introducing formal mentoring and coaching programs in HEIs for the holistic development of the students.

Keywords: Mentoring, Coaching, Professional Readiness, Qualitative Study, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a vital role in developing students' academic, personal, and professional readiness. As universities adopt student-centered models, there is growing recognition that academic instruction alone is insufficient, particularly amid evolving professional, technological, and global labour market demands. Consequently, well-designed coaching and mentoring programs can enhance decision-making, academic performance, retention, and psychological well-being, supporting student success in dynamic higher education contexts (Bhardwaj et al., 2025; Pacheco & Franco, 2024; Sanguino et al., 2025).

Moreover, structured developmental support, i.e. coaching and mentoring, has acquired significance within HEIs in developing countries such as Pakistan, where formal student support systems are still maturing (Ahmed et al., 2023; Batool et al., 2025; Haider et al., 2023). Studies show that these practices significantly contribute to student retention, well-being, and long-term success (Gonçalves et al., 2025; Harra & Vargas, 2024). Similarly, they play an essential role in helping students navigate academic pressures, career-related uncertainty, socio-cultural expectations, and personal development challenges common in university environments (Brown & Chartier, 2025; Nabi et al., 2025; Qureshi, 2018).

Conversely, in Pakistan, students often enter higher education with limited exposure to structured guidance frameworks (Keshf & Khanum, 2022; Nazish & Kang, 2025). With rising academic competition, shifting career landscapes, and increased mental health concerns among students, Pakistani HEIs have begun acknowledging the value of support systems (Sain et al., 2025; Sain & Rahma, 2023). However, implementation varies widely across institutions, with many Pakistani HEIs lacking formalized systems to consistently provide the required support; as a result, students often rely on informal teacher-student interactions or peer guidance (Haider et al., 2023; Wasim et al., 2025). Based on this, the need for effective and contextually relevant coaching and mentoring frameworks has become imperative (Nwosu, 2024).

Drawing on stakeholder experiences and existing literature, this study identifies key elements of effective coaching and mentoring, including relational trust, goal-setting, active listening, empowerment, autonomy, and

structured guidance (Leontopoulos et al., 2025). By highlighting current practices, gaps, and challenges, the study offers actionable recommendations, with students’ perspectives revealing how institutional policies, cultural norms, resources, and relational dynamics shape the effectiveness of support systems in Pakistani HEIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, mentoring is defined as a long-term, developmental relationship where a more experienced individual offers academic, career-related and psychosocial support to a less experienced individual (Deng et al., 2022; Ehsanian et al., 2025). The goal of mentoring is to support the complete holistic development of the student (Eleje et al., 2025; Sabatti & Zhao, 2025). This relationship is built on the working alliance, a collaborative bond based on trust and shared goals (Banks et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Qureshi & Ünlü, 2025). Contemporary research shows that university mentoring enhances student engagement, collaborative communication, retention, motivation, and long-term success, with positive effects on career choice, skill development, and transition outcomes (Jahan et al. 2023; Jiang & Wang, 2025; Qureshi et al., 2024; Yao & Wu, 2025).

Within the South Asian context, mentoring holds cultural significance as students navigate family expectations, institutional hierarchies, and limited career counselling, with mentors often helping reconcile personal aspirations and collective norms (Chia et al., 2024; Krishna et al., 2025). In the absence of formal structures, students rely on informal and peer mentoring, which has been shown to enhance retention, confidence, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, academic performance, and reduce dropout rates (Le et al., 2024; Oak et al., 2025; Sikka, 2025).

Coaching is a structured, short-term, goal-focused process that helps students develop specific academic and behavioral skills, distinguishing it from mentoring (Richardson et al., 2023; Tsarkos, 2024). Similarly, guided by the GROW model (Whitmore, 2010), coaching enhances self-regulation, confidence, and executive functioning, particularly during student transitions (Batoool et al., 2025; Donaldson et al., 2025; King et al., 2025). In Pakistan, university students face significant transition-related challenges that affect confidence and decision-making, underscoring the need for formalised coaching and mentoring structures, clearer roles, faculty training, and integrated mental health support. This study contributes context-specific insights grounded in students’ lived experiences (Affan et al., 2025; Akhtar, 2024; David et al., 2024; Hang & Guo, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

Mentoring and coaching are inherently interpersonal and subjective processes; therefore, qualitative inquiry offers a richer understanding of how students interpret these experiences in higher education settings (Boyatzis et al., 2023; Leeder et al., 2022). For this purpose, the following central question was curated: How do undergraduates perceive mentoring and coaching in Higher Education Institutes in Pakistan? The research employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of coaching and mentoring amongst students who are the primary HEI stakeholders in Pakistan. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students of STEAM fields to explore the expectations, behaviors, challenges and perceived strengths or weaknesses within the mentoring process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach enabled the collection of rich narratives capturing the academic, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions of mentoring, as well as institutional gaps and student needs. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and included relevant nonverbal cues such as pauses and hesitations.

Table 1 Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Education
1	Female	Electrical Engineering
2	Male	Biotechnology
3	Female	Engineering
4	Female	Psychology

The data was collected using the purposive sampling technique with an inclusion criteria of undergraduate students from STEAM fields who have experienced informal mentoring and coaching (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A bifold method was designed to ensure credibility of the study using a theoretical saturation tool (Ünlü

& Quereshi, 2023), and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor through repeated transcript review, member checking to confirm authenticity, use of verbatim excerpts to preserve participant voice and credibility, and rich descriptions to support transferability to other Pakistani HEIs.

Furthermore, a clear methodological process was followed, with documentation of each step from data collection to analysis. Coding and theme development followed a systematic and replicable approach based on Braun and Clarke (2019), establishing dependability. Moreover, for confirmability, direct quotations were used to support interpretations, ensuring that themes came directly from the data rather than assumptions. The review evaluated the mentoring practices based on commonly recognized qualities of effective academic mentoring, such as the mentor's reliability and availability, clarity and openness in communication and the ability to offer emotional understanding and support.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This involves a systematic, recursive six-phase process: Familiarizing with the dataset, generating initial codes, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing up. In the familiarization phase, the transcripts were read multiple times to extract key insights related to mentoring and coaching styles, strengths, limitations, student concerns, student preference in coaching and mentoring, and the emotional climate of the mentoring relationship. During the generation of initial codes, statements reflecting experiences, challenges, needs, and perceptions of mentoring were coded. Examples of codes included "informal mentoring," "career confusion," "emotional support," "institutional gaps," and "need for structured mentoring".

Additionally, given that Reflexive Thematic Analysis is reflexive in nature, the codes were constantly reviewed, after which they were grouped to form initial themes, capturing meaningful patterns. For example, codes related to faculty behavior, approachability, and mentorship quality were combined under "Faculty Approachability" and "Relational Dynamics". The themes were then refined by ensuring that they accurately represented the coded data and aligned with the research questions. In addition, overlapping themes were merged, and unclear ones were redefined. After the completion of the five phases, the process of writing up was initiated and completed, ensuring the synthesis of the themes resulted in a cohesive, well-written narrative.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: The findings show that while experiences varied, all participants engaged in some form of coaching or mentoring, primarily relying on informal support from seniors over formal university advising due to greater comfort and connection. When asked about why they did not avail faculty advisory, participant 1 stated, *"I think I did not feel the need for it because I think I did not take any of the advisory sessions which the university gave me, which is not good of me. But I think I never felt the need of it and then I think someone of my own age group was a better guide for me rather than someone who is way much older than me. I think there comes a communication barrier as well than a person with someone who is two to three years older than me"* (Interview#1, line 63 – 68).

Similarly, another participant shared, *"There used to be seminar where psychologist would come, and guide us on careers, and future options and they didn't help us in detail. But when I dropped out, I took guidance from my own sister, she guided me that I should go toward engineering as it better fits my skills and interests"* (Interview#3, line 41 – 44). These findings suggest that in terms of coaching and mentoring, students tend to have incredibly diverse experiences, which inadvertently shape their university experiences. This highlights a need for more structured and equitable mentoring initiatives at both the university and policy levels.

Finding 2: The findings of the study showcase that the guidance provided by faculty and senior mentors would be best described as multifaceted and fruitful, given that each participant declared that the guidance had a positive impact. Similarly, depending on the problem the respective participants had, the mentors guided them in a manner that allowed the participants to be self-sufficient. As stated by the participant, *"...They actually analyzed the whole situation for me, they were like these are the pros these are the cons. I cannot tell you what to do because tomorrow you're going to come and blame me for it. I cannot do that. He was like it's not obviously- the last*

decision is up to me that what I want to do but he was like now look at these are the pros and these are the cons then now weigh them yourself whether you want to do it or not. I think as I said again it's about someone listening to me and then giving me another perspective out of it. I think for me mentoring would be that" (Interview# 1, line 154 – 160).

Moreover, when asked about whether faculty has guided in terms of academic or personal development a participant stated, "teachers guide us that in future we should not restrict ourselves to teaching rather go for software engineering, office jobs and avail other field opportunities" (Interview 3, lines 50 – 51). Based on the findings, future initiatives should focus on strengthening and formalising mentoring and coaching structures to support students' needs.

Finding 3: The findings of the study identified a wide range of challenges faced by students; the challenges predominantly centered on academic and career-related concerns. As stated by the participant, "Time management is a big one, especially when you are balancing lab work and theory, taking both along simultaneously. And also, thinking about my career path is stressful, whether to go into research or industry, and honestly, stress management itself is tough" (Interview# 2, line 95 – 97).

Another participant explained, "I think looking into my current situation I think related to my academics or my work experience I would say if I'm going to do a job and like right now I'm looking for jobs and stuff so I'm just reaching out to my seniors whether this is a good option or not and all that" (Interview# 1, line 121 – 123). These findings not only support but also add to the expanding literature, shedding light on the numerous challenges faced by students during their university years. Based on the findings, there is a need to integrate academic support to assist students in such challenges.

Finding 4: The findings further reveal that participants' expectations of mentoring extend beyond competence, with students placing strong value on relational qualities such as honesty, politeness, flexibility, and an adaptable, non-rigid mentoring approach. As Participant stated, "What qualities I look for is I think firstly I look at that person's reputation in that specific context whether if it's I'm going for that scenario I would say whatever scenario I'm facing I would look into that person's reputation or experience in that context and that person's overall reputation as well...is that person trustworthy or not if I'm going to go and ask him for advice whether he would give me a good advice or not I think that depends on his previous advice he has given to people or his own life experiences and his own life choices as well and also that where he is standing right now I would not go to someone who I would look at and say I'm not sure about his choices I'm like whether I should go to that person for an advice or not" (Interview# 1, line 100 – 108).

Similarly, another participant reflecting on their experience stated, "First of all, a non-judgmental attitude, when you face them, they should calmly listen to you, rather than taunt you. Often times you go to teachers and they end up saying something that brings the students' morale down and they lose their confidence, in my opinion having a non-judgmental attitude is the most important" (Interview# 2, line 145 – 148). The findings highlight that students prioritise mentors' personality and character traits as key factors in the mentor selection process, indicating a need for more intentional and student-centered mentor selection practices.

Finding 5: The findings reveal that participants expressed clear personal preferences about the features of an ideal mentoring system that they believed would enhance its effectiveness. As participant 1, highlighting her preference for relatability, stated, "I think people, if I talk about a Gen Z specifically, people, we would prefer people whom we could relate to. People with a lesser age gap rather than my professor who is in his mid or late fifties, I would go to them. I would prefer someone who is in his thirties, I would say" (Interview#1, line 301 – 304).

Similarly, participant 2 shared a distinct yet complementary insight, stating, "Each student should have an assigned mentor who checks regularly. Also, there should be mental health support integrated and career guidance clearly mapped out for different fields within biotechnology" (Interview#2, line 161 – 163). These findings suggest that students are not only supportive of the concept of mentoring and coaching but also have a vision in terms of how they would wish to experience such systems or programs.

DISCUSSION

In a world where academic and labour competition grows fierce backed by the pressure to adopt AI, students themselves express the need for facilitation such as coaching and mentoring to ease the challenges they face and smooth their transition (Mughal & Qureshi, 2025; Rayford et al., 2022). Mentors play a key role in facilitating students' exploration and establishment stages by providing guidance, encouragement, and exposure to opportunities (Koide et al., 2024; Torres et al., 2025). Similarly, research suggests that when mentoring relationships are strong, students display higher academic achievement, career clarity, and psychological resilience (Dixon et al., 2023; Hayman et al., 2022). Conversely, specialized formal coaching is effective for performance improvement, with one-on-one academic coaching interventions significantly improving outcomes in graduate healthcare and medical education. When implemented together, coaching and mentoring serve as powerful mechanisms for improving academic transitions, managing stress, and promoting personal resilience (Boet et al., 2023; Miller-Kuhlmann et al., 2024).

This study explored the perceptions of students on coaching and mentoring through the lens of Schein's Career Anchors Theory and Donald Super's Life-Span – Life-Space Theory, offering a theoretical backing to understand the students' perspective and their lived experiences (Schein, 1996; Super, 1980). For instance, in the Pakistani context, parental expectations and social norms strongly influence career choices. Mentoring can empower students to make informed, individualized decisions. Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory further emphasizes that individuals develop through various career stages, each requiring adequate support for identity formation, skill acquisition, and vocational maturity (Super, 1980). For this, formal coaching and mentoring systems would facilitate the students by providing them with the required support to not only successfully develop at each stage, but also experience an easier transition during said stages.

Similarly, Schein's Career Anchors Theory highlights that career decisions are shaped by individuals' values, motives, and competencies, underscoring the value of structured mentoring conversations that align students' academic choices with long-term goals (Mahajan, 2024; Schein & Maanen, 2016). In addition, student success also depends on emotional and psychological support, while international models emphasize structured matching, trained mentors, progress tracking, and holistic support, indicating the need for Pakistani HEIs to revise mentoring and coaching policies (Feng et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2025; Tamale et al., 2024).

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined students' perceptions of coaching and mentoring in Pakistani higher education institutions, highlighting the need for institutional reforms that prioritise student comfort, adequate resources, and professional standards. The findings suggest adopting structured mentoring programmes with trained advisors, supported by ongoing faculty development in communication, counselling, and career guidance, alongside the integration of counselling, academic advising, and career services.

Furthermore, to improve accessibility, mentoring should be more approachable through soft-skills training, involvement of younger or specialised advisors, and a tiered model combining peer and faculty support. At the policy level, recognising coaching and mentoring as formal responsibilities with protected time and compensation is essential. Students should also be encouraged to actively engage with support services. However, the study's limited geographic scope and small sample size may restrict transferability; future research should adopt longitudinal mixed-methods designs and include broader stakeholder perspectives across Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the transformative potential of effective coaching and mentoring in Pakistani HEIs, showing that autonomy-supportive and relational practices enhance academic performance, career clarity, and psychological resilience. However, inconsistent experiences and the lack of institutional structures highlight the need to move beyond individual goodwill toward standardized, resource-supported mentoring frameworks that formalise peer support, allocate dedicated faculty time, and promote student autonomy to ensure equitable access and sustainable impact.

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