

Mentoring research projects in the Croatian higher education document framework

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Abstract

Purpose – Approaching mentoring from the theoretical tradition of continental pedagogy and contrasting it to the neoliberal organization of the academy, this paper aims to analyze how the Croatian higher education document framework constructs mentoring graduate and postgraduate students' research projects.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis of 50 national- and university-level documents, which were coded using an adapted strategy described by Saldaña (2014), was guided by the following research questions. 1. Which elements of the mentor's activity in guiding the research projects of graduate and postgraduate students are addressed by the relevant Croatian higher education documents? 2. Which elements of the graduate and postgraduate students' activity in conducting research projects are addressed? 3. Which structural dimensions of mentoring these research projects are addressed?

Findings – The results point to the construction of mentoring as a pedagogical relationship based on guidance, support and dialog and also signal the processes of quantification of education and responsabilization of individuals.

Practical implications – The results can be used in the critical revision of the documents as well as in supporting mentors in their professional roles.

Originality/value – This is the first analysis of the Croatian higher education document framework focused on mentoring students' research projects.

Keywords Pedagogical relationship, Research mentor, Mentee, Document analysis, Taguette

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Mentoring students is an integral part of the professional role of university professors. Having practiced this role weekly [1], I started to wonder why preparation for mentoring and its external validation are lacking. Trying to interpret these personal dilemmas in the context of the structural factors that shape them, this paper aims to analyze how the Croatian higher education document framework constructs mentoring graduate and postgraduate students' research projects. In the introductory part, I conceptually outline mentoring [2], observing it through the lens of two juxtaposed understandings: as a pedagogical relationship in the tradition of continental pedagogy and as a performative practice in the context of the neoliberal organization of the academy.

The mentor–mentee relationship has probably always existed (see Wright-Harp and Cole, 2008), but the pioneering empirical work was done by Levinson *et al.* (1978), cited in Allen *et al.* (2004) and Kram (1983) in a corporate environment. Depending on the context,



mentoring might be defined “as a process whereby one guides, leads, supports, teaches, and challenges other individuals to facilitate their personal, educational, and professional growth and development through mutual respect and trust” (Wright-Harp and Cole, 2008, p. 8) or as a relationship between a young adult and a more experienced one (Kram, 1983) that supports the developmental capacities of the mentee (for a detailed overview of the definitions of mentoring in education, see Ghosh, 2012). Following this, mentoring is often analyzed concerning the (developmental) age of the mentee (Eby *et al.*, 2008, 2013) and the roles of mentors (see Wright-Harp and Cole, 2008). This paper focuses on a research mentor who shares knowledge and skills with mentees and facilitates their scientific development (Wright-Harp and Cole, 2008).

The effects of mentoring are well documented, but systemic reviews and meta-analyses are usually directed at mentoring in the workplace. Allen *et al.*'s (2004) meta-analysis of 43 individual studies conducted in a non-academic setting concluded that “[t]he results are generally supportive of claims associated with the benefits of mentoring but also reveal that the effect size associated with objective career outcomes is small” (p. 132), emphasizing that psychosocial aspects (such as counseling, friendship and acceptance) are more related to satisfaction with the mentor than career-oriented aspects of mentoring. Eby *et al.* (2008) also associated mentoring with positive but modest effects, thus warning “scholars, practitioners, and policy makers not to overestimate the potential effect of mentoring” (p. 264). In the academic context, research has been conducted on the compatibility of students’ and mentors’ interpersonal dispositions (Bernier *et al.*, 2005), the fit between mentor and protégé levels of commitment and its association with relationship satisfaction (Poteat *et al.*, 2009), the role of academic mentoring in preventing student dropout (Larose *et al.*, 2011), mentor’s support to doctoral students (Geesa *et al.*, 2020) and the qualities that university mentors should have (Carpintero, 2015; Eller *et al.*, 2014). A qualitative research of 117 mentor–protégé dyads (Eller *et al.*, 2014) revealed that students expected more positive feedback, while mentors also addressed the importance of negative feedback; students (but not the mentors) wanted more friendly relations, and all mentioned a lack of time as a relevant obstacle. Eby *et al.* (2008) associated the stronger connection of academic mentoring (compared to youth and/or workplace mentoring) to mentees’ outcomes to various factors, including that “mentors within the academic context may be better equipped to provide the functions associated with mentoring as it often part of their own job training” (p. 264). As for the effects of academic mentoring, Wang and Shibayama (2022) investigated the impact of the mentor’s creativity on the creativity of Ph.D. candidates via the dimensions of encouraging autonomy and exploration, concluding that the positive effect was manifested only later. In a study by Webb *et al.* (2009), university professors emphasized the personal fulfillment that mentoring brought them while their mentees also recognized benefits such as help in implementing projects or in discovering recent literature through mentees’ work. In 12 focus groups consisting of Canadian master’s and Ph.D. students, Hall and Liva (2021) focused on the student perspective, highlighting that working with a mentor was a transformative experience for students, but students also recognized the importance of university structural support for mentors and the importance of reducing the mentor’s workload (a similar conclusion on the importance of supportive institutional environment can be found in Davis and Jones, 2020).

I observe a mentor’s support to a student conducting a research project as a classic pedagogical triangle (here with *mentee–mentor–research project* components) and a pedagogical relationship in the tradition of human science pedagogy (Friesen, 2020). For Nohl (1933), “education is the formative community of educator and educand” (p. 3), filled with love and authority. Years later, van Manen (1995) pointed out that in the concept of pedagogy, teaching is not guided not only by principles of efficiency but also by ethical principles, following which Langeveld (cited in van Manen, 2006) saw pedagogy as primarily

an ethical activity. When applied to mentoring, the mentor is not understood as a technician who checks whether the student has mastered the research phases according to the plan and rewards success or sanctions failure. The mentor is seen as a person who affects both the research process and the student's self with the whole personality [3]. For [Nohl \(1933\)](#), this commitment to another being, to be pedagogical, requires a focus and is "doubly determined: by the love for the child as he is and by the love for his educational goal, the child's ideal" (p. 4). This opens a delicate question of whether the mentor should emphasize the current possibilities of the mentee or optimistically focus on the potential. Focusing on the first, the mentor risks becoming the technician described above. Focusing on the latter, the mentor risks both the mentee's and his/her own frustrations if the potential is not realized and is exposed to a new polarity that must be kept in balance: that between the authenticity and the affirmativeness of the feedback given to a mentee. Interestingly, the graduate and Ph.D. theses are evaluated, whereby it is assumed that the source of the grade differentiation is the quality of the student's engagement and not the quality of mentoring. The work of [Bouter et al. \(2016\)](#) opens a space for critically reflecting on this individual responsabilization of students. They articulated 60 types of research misconduct, and one of them (the second most frequent one) was inadequate mentoring of junior coworkers. As [Haven et al. \(2022, p. 575\)](#) warned,

When analyzing research misconduct cases of PhD candidates, it became apparent that in most cases the supervision had been inadequate ([Davis et al., 2007](#); [Wright et al., 2008](#)). Some authors have argued that, in those cases, the supervisor should be (partially) held responsible for the misconduct ([Alfredo and Hart, 2011](#))

This can, however, motivate the mentor to take on too much responsibility, thereby risking becoming the ghost author of the conducted research. Moreover, at one point, a mentor will probably become a member of the committee that (allegedly objectively) evaluates the quality of the work that they have co-constructed.

The emotional dimension of mentoring is also worth discussing. Mentors in research conducted by [Haven et al. \(2022\)](#) drew attention to the demanding part of the program that dealt with their own or their Ph.D. candidates' emotions, perceiving such discourse as rare in academia. Focusing on undergraduates' emotions in engaging with sensitive topics while conducting qualitative research, [Simpson and Wilson-Smith \(2017\)](#) quoted a participant who pointed out that only her supervisors could understand the difficulty of researching sensitive topics using a qualitative methodology. The authors concluded that it was "important to note that quality academic supervision is key to ensuring the safety of undergraduate research students" (p. 39). This importance of mentor and institutional responsibility for the well-being of researchers during emotionally demanding research was also emphasized by [Kumar and Cavallaro \(2018\)](#) and [Orr et al. \(2021\)](#). The ethics committees mainly deal with participants who are not researchers ([Dickinson-Swift et al., 2008](#), cited in [Emerald and Carpenter, 2015](#); [Orr et al., 2021](#)), ignoring the emotions of the researcher ([Kumar and Cavallaro, 2018](#)). In a similar manner, the emotions of the mentor, who also bears the emotional burden, are left aside in the existing research.

The institutional context was also added to this discussion. University professors are socialized into their research roles, but preparation for the teaching part of that role is rarely formalized. In Croatia, it is reduced to occasional support programs for teaching assistants or workshops for mentors guiding Ph.D. (but not masters) candidates for the first time. When compared to formalized doctoral studies, which every assistant in Croatian higher education joins right after employment, I see this dichotomy as another example of the gap between the science and the teaching role of university professors, where the research component is recognized and subsequently rewarded as more important (see [Young, 2006](#)). But as [Ambrosetti \(2014\)](#) warned, "[m]entoring is not a natural ability that people inherently have,

so an effective teacher may not necessarily make an effective mentor” (p. 30), which is why the author designed a pilot mentoring preparation course. The downside of this emphasis is the danger of minimizing the intuitive component of pedagogical tact: even though criticality toward intuition in teaching can be associated with an increased focus on performative activities that can be precisely measured (Sipman *et al.*, 2019), research focused on the qualities that mentors of future teachers (in schools) should have has shown these qualities to be focused on dimensions (such as emotional receptivity, empathy or trust in others) that are not teachable (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017).

The additional structural prerequisites include time allocated for mentoring. In research conducted with eight Ph.D. mentors, the time-consuming aspect of mentoring appeared as one of the two main challenges (Webb *et al.*, 2009). This problem needs to be situated in the context of the neoliberal academy that cultivates “individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behavior” (Gilbert, 2013, p. 9, cited in Zembylas, 2022, p. 2), where the greatest importance is attributed to activities with maximum economic potential (Davies, 2005, cited in Shahjahan, 2015). Straubhaar *et al.* (2020) perceived the academy as a place where human beings are “defined by their productivity rather than their humanity” (p. 199), while Mgaiwa and Kapinga (2021) pointed out the “powerful neoliberal forces in HE systems associated with competition among academics and established imperative of ‘publish or perish’” (p. 129), which leaves little time for caring relations (cf. Cross *et al.*, 2019; Shahjahan, 2020). In an audit culture where high-rank journal papers and competitive project grants are prioritized over micro-pedagogical interactions, Mountz *et al.* (2015) pointed out that “good scholarship requires time to think, write, read, research, analyze, edit, organize, and resist the growing administrative and professional demands” (p. 1235), thus proposing a focus on what is usually “not counted,” with mentoring identified as one of the slow-scholarship strategies of resistance to the temporal regimes of the neoliberal university (Mountz *et al.*, 2015).

Method

The following research questions guided the analysis:

- RQ1. Which elements of the mentor’s activity in guiding the research projects of graduate and postgraduate students are addressed by the relevant Croatian higher education documents?
- RQ2. Which elements of the graduate and postgraduate students’ activity in conducting research projects are addressed?
- RQ3. Which structural dimensions of mentoring these research projects are addressed?

A list of national documents, laws and by-laws relevant to science and higher education (Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, Republic of Croatia, n.d.) was followed. This search, using the keyword *mentor*, generated only one document, which was subsequently omitted from the analysis because mentoring was mentioned only in the context of the relationship between a teaching or research assistant and a mentor (a specific type of employment that is not the focus of this paper). I subsequently included the *Collective Agreement for Science and Higher Education* (Kolektivni ugovor za znanost i visoko obrazovanje, 2019) and the *Rulebook on the Conditions for Selection into Scientific Professions* (Pravilnik o uvjetima za izbor u znanstvena zvanja, 2017). Concerning the documents from the university level, the initial plan was to use the keyword *mentor* to search for all the documents that nine Croatian universities listed on their websites. After reviewing hundreds of documents, I came to the conclusion that several universities did not publish many documents in a form that enabled searching and that the documentation that universities generated was substantially different. Based on the documents I had detected up to this

stage, I listed the types that needed to be included for all universities (statute, code of ethics, rulebook on [post]graduate studies, rulebook on diploma thesis, rulebook on awarding the excellence of employees and students and rulebook on professional obligations of employees). This strategy allowed me to detect documents that were not available in searchable form and prepare them (with external help) for further analysis, thus avoiding hyper- or hypo-representation of certain universities. The documents that belonged to the type that was analyzed but did not mention the keyword or mentioned it in a context that was not relevant to this analysis were omitted. [Appendix](#) provides an overview of the 50 university-level documents included in this analysis.

I coded the documents using an adapted strategy described by [Saldaña \(2014\)](#): to *foresee*, where I reflected the congruence of the theoretical framework, the research design and the data necessary to respond to the research questions; to *survey* optimal methodological solutions, where I was concerned with the relationship between deductive and inductive elements of the analysis; to *collect* the necessary documentation; to *organize* a corpus of documentation; to *jot* my ideas and assumptions during the initial data access; to *prioritize*, during which I re-searched each document using the keyword and omitted non-relevant ones; to *analyze*, where in the cyclical reading I familiarized myself with documents; to *pattern*, where I noticed similarities across documents; to *code*, during which, with the help of Taguette, I used process coding, consistent with research questions focused on the actions of actors; to *interrelate*, where I tried to establish relations between categories and the codes within them, which resulted in refining the codes and their definitions in three iterative processes; to *reason*, aimed at establishing conclusions; to *theme*, trying to form “phrases or sentences that summarize the manifest (apparent) and latent (underlying) meanings of data” (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998; both cited in [Saldaña, 2014](#), p. 30), and to *assert*, trying to make an interpretive synthesis supported by descriptions of the relevant parts of the documents.

Results

[Table 1](#), using the framework of the three research questions (with the additional *relational category* of the pedagogical triangle), presents the generated themes and codes.

Related to Research Question 1, two themes stood out: formal and positional aspects of mentoring. The *formal aspect of mentoring* points to *operationalizing mentoring practice* [4]. A mentor is described as a person who helps and guides the Ph.D. student (1, 5, 21, 25, 30 and 32); monitors the quality of the work (21 and 25); confirms the feasibility of the research plan (23); helps with the selection of literature (17, 30 and 32); guides the student in the selection of appropriate research methods (17, 21 and 30); evaluates progress (17); encourages the publication of papers (21, 23, 25 and 30) and enables participation in projects, gatherings and conferences (21, 23 and 25). The *rights and responsibilities of a mentor* are described in detail: the mentor gives consent to the doctoral student’s activities at the other institution (21, 23, 25 and 34); can continue to mentor after retirement (21, 23, 30 and 34); holds consultations with the Ph.D. student and submits written reports on the progress (30 and 32); proposes the acceptance or rejection of the topic of the doctoral thesis (23, 33 and 34); reacts to the student’s request for changing a mentor (17, 23, 25 and 28); submits a report on the progress of the Ph.D. student (17, 21, 23, 25, 28, 32 and 34); gives an opinion on the research plan (25 and 28); familiarizes the student with the procedures in writing the thesis (28 and 38); refers the student to the literature and gives suggestions for improving the thesis (35 and 38); returns unsatisfactory work for revision (16 and 38); confirms the originality of the student’s work (16, 30, 37, 38 and 39); documents the final grade and reviews the final version of the thesis after defense (39) and together with the Ph.D. student requests protection of the research results (17, 21, 25, 28, 30 and 34). *Positional aspects of mentoring* describe mentoring as a *part*

Pedagogical triangle	Theme	Code
Mentor	Formal aspects of mentoring	Operationalizing mentoring practice Addressing the various rights and responsibilities of a mentor
	Positional aspects of mentoring	Being part of the professional habitus of a university teacher Profiling the mentor's ethical stance
Mentor–mentee	Mentoring as a pedagogical relationship	Mentoring being a supportive pedagogical relationship
		Mentoring being a hierarchical pedagogical relationship
Mentee	Formal description of the student's position	Addressing the various rights and responsibilities of a student
Context	Mentoring procedures	Institutional defining of mentoring Formalizing the defense process
	Care about the quality of mentoring	Supporting the quality of mentoring Meeting the criteria for being a mentor
	Making mentoring accountable	Requiring a mentor's signature or consent
		Monitoring the quality of mentoring Timing of mentoring Aligning mentoring with market needs

Source(s): Created by author

Table 1.
Codes and themes

of the professional habitus of a university teacher: as a part of the enumerated activities of the members of academia (2, 3, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 19, 20, 46, 47, 48, 49 and 50; *Collective Agreement for Science and Higher Education*, Narodne novine, 2019), as part of their teaching (49) and as a basis for rewarding their excellence when mentoring a student who won or applied for the rector's award (44). *Profiling the mentor's ethical stance* emphasizes that the mentor should perform the duties conscientiously (10), must not take advantage of the superior position (7 and 12) and cannot be a person who has violated any aspect of the ethical code of the profession (17, 27 and 30), whereby plagiarism, extortion and harassment are emphasized (9 and 10).

Related to Research Question 2, I singled out one code, *addressing the various rights and responsibilities of a student*, located in the theme of formal description of the student's position, which emphasizes that the student has the right to consultations, to a mentor and mentoring work (1, 4, 5, 6, 15, 16, 18 and 20); to select, propose and change mentors (1, 6, 17, 21, 23, 25, 28, 30 and 34); to write a thesis in a foreign language, provided that the mentor knows it (16 and 36); to enroll in courses and conduct parts of research at other institutions (23, 26 and 34); to use the research resources of the institution (26), together with the mentor to request protection of the research results (17, 21, 25, 26, 28, 30 and 34), and to react to the mentor's negative report (17 and 26). It is also emphasized that the student has to know the procedures related to the application, preparation and defense of the thesis (8 states the obligation of consulting with mentor at least once every two months); propose the topic of the final paper in agreement with the mentor (28 and 39); submit a request for the appointment of a mentor (38) and check the originality of the work and submit a report on it (38). The Ph.D. student is obliged to submit a report on the work to the competent council or mentor (17, 25 and 34), to inform the mentor about the relevant stages of research and at least once a month consult with the mentor (25), to submit the final thesis to the mentor in PDF format so that the mentor can check its originality (37) and to comply with the mentor's instructions and requests (25).

Although it was not foreseen by the research questions, the coding generated the theme of *mentoring as a pedagogical relationship*, which, instead of unilaterally accentuating the rights and responsibilities of one party, points to the relational nature of the *supportive pedagogical relationship*, where the mentor (emphasis mine) *helps* or *guides* the Ph.D. student (1, 5, 17, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 30, 32 and 34); in cooperation with the student defines theses of the final and/or diploma thesis (37); mentoring must be based on *mutual respect* (7 and 12); the mentor *encourages* the Ph.D. student to disseminate the results of the work (21, 23, 25, 26, 28 and 34); *enables the participation* in projects and conferences (21 and 34); *helps* to choose the topic and appropriate methodology (17, 28 and 38) and *helps* students with literature (17, 30 and 32). Ph.D. studies are described as a period of *regular contact* between student and mentor (25). To this theme, I added the code that describes mentoring as a *hierarchical pedagogical relationship*, where the mentor is recognized as an *expert* whose expertise the student should respect (24 and 38); the mentor *supervises* the student (17, 21, 26, 30, 35 and 37), *evaluates* the progress (17, 36 and 38) and *withholds consent* that dissertation meets the set criteria (25), and the student is obliged to *comply* with the mentor's instructions, requests and remarks (16, 23, 25 and 36).

Regarding Research Question 3, three themes stood out: mentoring procedures, taking care of the quality of mentoring and making mentoring accountable. As far as the topic of *mentoring procedures* is concerned, it includes the code of *institutional defining of mentoring*, which lists various institutions that regulate the formal aspects of mentoring, from the selection and confirmation of the mentor to the signing of the contract on dual doctorates, the process of changing the mentor and so on. Together with a highly frequent code of *formalizing the defense process*, the more comprehensive consideration of this topic exceeds the aim of this paper. The theme of *care for the quality of mentoring* goes beyond the mentioned formal aspects and detects standards of excellence in mentoring. Regarding the code *supporting the quality of mentoring*, the documents state that the criterion for enrollment in doctoral studies is the availability of mentoring capacities (21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 30 and 34), and the competent councils must take care of mentors' workloads (23 and 25). While some documents leave the decision on the maximum number of candidates that the mentor can simultaneously guide to the doctoral studies council (34), others define that number (23, 26 and 32). Before taking over the first mentorship of Ph.D. student, the mentor is obliged to attend a workshop (23, 25, 27, 28, 30 and 47), while in some documents (34), this has the status of a recommendation or it is only stated that such workshops are organized (26). Some institutions (25) add to this the informal transfer of the experiences of older mentors as an activity in which new potential mentors must participate. The option of double mentoring is mentioned as an explicit form of ensuring the quality of the thesis (21, 23, 25, 28 and 34); successful mentoring is a basis for rewarding employees (41, 42 and 44) and the development of mentoring capacities one of the goals of scientific activity (3). Everything so far described focuses on mentoring the Ph.D. students. However, one document (16) states that in mentoring undergraduate and graduate students, a fair distribution (among the professors) of the number of candidates that the mentor supports (16, 36 and 38) should be ensured. Finding an adequate mentor can also be seen as one of the key elements in supporting the quality of mentoring, and some institutions (25) have an advisor who helps candidates with that. The second code in this theme, *meeting the criteria for being a mentor*, requires a specific title or position of a professor (1, 2, 16, 17, 21, 23, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38 and 39), to which some documents add specific conditions: two years of post-doctorate research experience and evidence of scientific activity in the field (23), the number of articles in reputable scientific databases, the number of international conferences attended or projects carried out (28) and a positive opinion about the mentor's mentoring work (25 and 26).

The last theme is *the accountability of mentoring*, which contains four codes that point to traces of neoliberal organization in the academy, either through requiring the mentor's

responsibility to be embodied in a signature or through setting rigid time frames for mentoring, explicit or implicit monitoring of the mentor or gradually aligning the mentoring with the needs of the market. The documents are saturated with *requiring a mentor's signature or consent*: giving consent for being a mentor (21, 23, 25 and 28), along with a declaration of competence for mentoring; consent for submitting and accepting a topic of a thesis (16, 17, 23, 25, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 37, 38 and 39), for the confirmation of the mentor's software check of the originality of the work (16, 30, 32, 37, 38 and 39), for the recommendation of the excellence of the graduate work (40 and 43) and for reporting on the progress of doctoral students (30). Specific situations that require the mentor's signature are consultation records, signed both by the student and mentor (30). This is connected to the *timing of mentoring*, which places mentoring as one of the teaching obligations within the 40-h work week (49) or 60% of the time allocated to teaching (*Collective Agreement for Science and Higher Education*, Narodne novine, 2019). Furthermore, the documents state that the mentor has to read the first version of the thesis and give guidelines for improvement within a maximum of one month (36) and demand that the student consult the mentor when preparing the diploma thesis at least once every two months (38), once a month (25) or at least once a semester (30 and 32) with the doctoral or specialist study student. The deadline for writing a negative report on an unsatisfactory doctorate is also defined (25). The documents are also saturated with explicit or implicit forms of *monitoring the quality of mentoring*: a mentor cannot be the president of the committee for the defense of a graduate thesis (16, 37 and 39), the president or member of the committee for the evaluation of specialist work (24, 32 and 33) or the president or member of the committee for the evaluation or defense of the (synopsis of the) doctorate (1, 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 32 and 34). Some institutions require keeping records on the ratio of the number of enrolled doctoral students and those who have defended their doctorate for each mentor (23, 25 and 34). If the doctoral thesis is rejected, the mentor cannot be the mentor of new candidates any time soon (46), while a student whose final or graduate thesis is not accepted after the revision might be assigned to another mentor (37). Mentors who are not employees of a university must sign a formal contract assuming responsibility (23, 28 and 34). The publicity of the doctorate (17 and 26) or of the rewarded student paper (45) is stated in some documents. The final code, *aligning mentoring with market needs*, although rare in frequency, brings inflows of market logic into the academy, stating that enrollment quotas for doctoral studies are determined, among other things, according to the economic needs of the community (23 and 25), while the mentor does not have to meet the prescribed criteria for mentors if the funds for the doctoral student are secured from competitive sources (27).

Discussion

The analyzed Croatian documents address all three elements of the pedagogical triangle, with the element of the student least layered. I relate this to the fact that mentoring is a professional activity in which an employee (a mentor) is paid and must comply with certain regulations. The mentor's activities are described in detail, but *in different documents*. Therefore, by reading only certain documents, the mentor can only get an insight into the breadth of practices that mentoring research projects in higher education entail. The results point to the construction of mentoring as a pedagogical relationship based on guidance, support and dialog, which is a departure from this expected formal depiction of mentoring. The hierarchical component of this relationship, where the mentor examines the work, returns it for revision, gives instructions and supervises the student, is compatible with the described tradition of human science pedagogy (Nohl, 1933) and should not be negatively labeled as a misuse of authority. Bašić (2009) pointed out the problems of determination of the hierarchical component of the pedagogical relationship. She argued that this symmetry:

implies equal power and equal responsibility, so both partners are equally responsible for the success or failure of the relationship, and the classic category of “pedagogical responsibility” in the sense of the “representative” role of adults (that is, making important decisions for children until they acquire the ability to judge) no longer makes sense. (Bašić, 2009, p. 34)

In this sense, *mentoring as support* and *mentoring as hierarchical positioning* are not dichotomies but a continuum, where the mentor needs to decide whether to emphasize supporting the student’s autonomy and the current state or insisting on reaching certain standards of excellence, i.e. supporting the possible (cf. Nohl, 1933). I consider the absence of any discussion of the complexity of that balancing to be problematic. If the student is exclusively autonomous while conducting the research, the mentoring becomes redundant, and only an evaluation of whether the research was adequately done would be needed (or the mentor’s role could be performed by software for plagiarism detection). If, on the other hand, the mentor repeatedly asks the student to do better, the mentor will be inscribed in the final work as a ghost author. Therefore, the question of whether the student is exclusively responsible for the quality of the work or the low-quality work is also a consequence of inadequate mentoring remains open, as Bouter *et al.* (2016) and Haven *et al.* (2022) pointed out. This dilemma is also obscured behind concise formal guidelines and individual rights and responsibilities. De Lissovoy (2018) warned us that the concept of autonomy and a strong emphasis on the rights and responsibilities of the individual is an instrument of neoliberal logic, where the greater “responsibility for our own destinies is the answer to the social ills that increasingly afflict us” (p. 193). It is also interesting to note that the signature, an instrument of individual responsabilization, is mentioned in numerous documents. Some situations that require the signature of both parties (holding consultations, for example) are particularly interesting, pointing to the growing bureaucratization, which transfers mentoring into the legal domain, from which it did not initially arise. This is in line with Giroux’s (2010) writings on *bare pedagogy* in higher education, “focused on market-driven competitiveness and even militaristic goal-setting, while critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on the hard work of critical analysis, moral judgments, and social responsibility” (p. 184) becomes less present.

The *emotional dimension of mentoring* is omitted from the documents, which corresponds to the claim that the discourse of emotions is not welcomed in the academic environment (Haven *et al.*, 2022). The previously described research (Eller *et al.*, 2014) showed that effective mentoring was associated with a caring personal relationship, as well as that mentees wanted more friendly relationships with mentors, although this attribution was not mentioned by the mentors involved in the research. Åkerlind and McAlpine (2015) addressed teleological orientations mentors and mentees might have and the risk that those differences, if unacknowledged, produce “a misplaced feeling of not belonging when students’ views differ from those of their primary supervisor” (p. 11). This calls for further investigation, not because policy documents should set an imperative for mentors and mentees to develop close relationship, but to explain that mentoring is an ongoing relationship with complex dynamics and to discuss the extent to which the mentor is invited – and even competent – to address issues that might arise from that relationship.

The *temporal dimension of mentoring* is mentioned predominantly when setting deadlines for both parties. Some documents prescribe the number of consultations they should “do” (38 and 25), which in cases of problems could be the basis of individual responsabilization for either the mentor or the mentee, thereby obscuring the social conditions that shape the context (Lemke, 2001, cited in De Lissovoy, 2018), namely the time that the mentor has for dedicated support of the student’s research in a university focused on measurable achievements (Hall and Liva, 2021; Mountz *et al.*, 2015). Based on the results of three online group interviews, Cornell *et al.* (2022) drew attention to the fact that mentors of

Ph.D. candidates, due to strong institutional pressure to complete the study as soon as possible, have to estimate how much time the candidates will need for this process, whereby the longer duration of studies reflects the alleged weaker mentoring capacities, motivating mentors to select candidates at the very start based on “a tacit evaluation of whether the applicant has the dispositions described earlier – dispositions that could (and should), with sufficient time and appropriate supervision, develop during PhD” (p. 156).

Quality mentoring is recognized as a part of the quality work of a university professor; a mentor can be rewarded if the student applies for the rector’s award or successfully defends the doctorate. How to achieve this mentoring excellence remains ambiguous. The documents differ in the practice of limiting the number of (mainly Ph.D.) candidates the mentor can guide, with some prescribing the number but allowing the possibility to increase it, while others transfer the determination of the number to the institutional bodies. Insisting that no one can mentor more than three candidates without taking into account the current stage of the individual’s career can lead to a situation where all the university professors are expected to do the same instead of enabling profiling according to interests (cf. *Room for everyone’s talent*, Vsnu et al., 2019). There is, however, the possibility that the relevant bodies do not decide on the maximum number of students per mentor based on the mentoring capacities and affinities but on the need for the influx of as many students as possible, without providing the mentor time to devote to this process. This could be another example of the marketization of education, where the quality of pedagogical relations might be secondary to the concern for the influx of student tuition fees. This is more relevant when keeping in mind the trend of declining state funding for higher education in Croatia (Public Funding Observatory 2021/2022; Bunescu et al., 2022, p. 6, lists Croatia as an example of the country “where public authorities have cut into the core budget of universities”). Having this in mind, it is also interesting that enrollment quotas for doctoral studies can be determined according to the economic needs of the community, while the mentor does not have to meet the prescribed criteria if the funds for the doctoral student are secured from competitive sources, which points to the relativization of the criteria of excellence due to the influx of external capital.

The documents also differ in *addressing the mentor’s inauguration into the mentoring role*. In some cases, participation in a formal program is imperative, while in some cases, it is only a recommendation. Based on the results of the research conducted at three universities in Tanzania, which showed that participants lacked regular training for practicing their mentoring role (mentors of early career academics), the authors emphasized the necessity of formal institutional support for mentoring (Mgaiwa and Kapinga, 2021). While the confidence in natural talents for mentoring can be seen as moving away from neoliberal performativity and an appreciation of the intuitive component of pedagogical tact, which participants in Sipman et al.’s (2019) research found necessary, it might also seem that a university professor is inherently a good mentor, which is a position Ambrosetti (2014) criticizes.

Conclusion

The analysis of 50 national- and university-level documents showed that the Croatian higher education document framework contains the pedagogical dimension of mentoring but at the same time signals the construction of mentoring as a relationship subjected to quantification and individual responsabilization. I find this conclusion to be practically relevant, following Ball’s (1993) understanding of the potential effect of policy texts on everyday life. This does not imply the linearity of the transmission of policy messages into laws or programs and afterward practice but respects the distinction between three different processes, no matter how intertwined they are: production, distribution and reception of a document (Bernstein,

1990; Johnson, 1986/1987; both cited in [Apple, 2019](#)). The reception remains outside the focus of this analysis. With this in mind, as well as with the warning that “there is nothing inherently ‘neoliberal’ about the discourse of personal responsibility” (Watts, 2022, p. 466, as cited in [Zembylas, 2022](#), p. 10), based on which [Zembylas \(2022\)](#) called for conducting empirical research on this topic that would take into account “both macro- and micro-level neoliberal processes that aim at developing affective capacities such as self-regulation, responsibility, and individualism” (p. 5), I see moving away from document analysis toward research with university professors and students as the next step. Such research would deepen the understanding of how the procedures described in the documents and their identified contradictions are negotiated in lived educational reality. Based on these analyses, it would be possible to reflect on the possibilities of creating a national-level document on mentoring students’ research projects. Namely, it should be remembered that the various elements of mentoring are addressed in a total of 50 different documents, with significant differences in the attention universities give to these elements. In the absence of national-level documents, mentors are left to their institutional framework, orally transmitted practices, their pedagogical tact or decisions made due to external circumstances. By problematizing this, I do not want to claim that a top-down approach would solve the problems that appear in practice. On the contrary, I see an initiative of the mentors in opening discussion about the issues surrounding their practice at their institutions, especially ethical ones, as a superior solution, which could lead to the articulation of the documents corresponding more to the needs of the practice.

The limitations of the research are that the corpus is filled with different types of documents from different universities, which is why it would be interesting to do this type of analysis for one university and then conduct the described empirical research with participants from that university. Furthermore, I carried out the analysis by myself from my university professor position and mentor perspective, and despite paying attention to the cyclical reading of the documents and refining codes, the possibility of missing relevant content remains open. As an additional limitation, I recognize the decision to approach mentoring without distinguishing different levels of education as problematic, given that the analysis has shown how mentoring graduate and doctoral projects is treated differently, with more significance given to the relationships between a mentor and a doctoral student.

Notes

1. I am a university professor in Croatia, dedicated to the quality of teaching and mentoring, which I often analyze using the theoretical framework of critical and feminist pedagogy. I usually lack time to devote to my mentoring role, which I resolve at the expense of my private time. Although this paper does not address the gender dimension of mentoring, I also recognize how replication of the traditional gender role of a caring woman can appear in the context of the mentor–mentee relationship.
2. I use the concept of *mentoring*, in line with the pedagogical theoretical tradition elaborated later; with my personal experience of working at university, where I guide students in their research projects in an intensive, time- and energy-consuming practice with a strong relational and emotional component; and in line with the analyzed legal framework: in Croatia, each form of supporting students in their research (in practice as well as in the documents) is recognized as *mentoring*. The differences of meaning attributed to *research supervision* or *mentoring* in different contexts (see [Lunsford et al., 2017](#)) are, though relevant, omitted, acknowledging the position of [Radha Krishna et al. \(2019\)](#), who claimed that “[r]ole modeling, teaching and tutoring, coaching and supervision lie within a mentoring spectrum of increasingly structured interactions, assisted by assessments, feedback and personalized support that culminate with a mentoring approach” (p. 1).
3. A pedagogical relationship is an intergenerational relationship between an adult and a child, despite its applicability to different types of relationships ([Friesen and Kenklies, 2021](#)), which requires

caution when translating it to this paper. Although the mentoring research project includes the hierarchies of competence and responsibility, it is a relationship between *two adults*.

4. In parentheses, I indicate the documents (Appendix Document list) in which the content is mentioned. The goal of the analysis is not to determine the frequencies of codes or to compare documents from different universities but to describe in detail the elements that the documents mention in their totality. When I believe this is relevant, following Braun and Clarke (2022), I indicate the greater or lesser frequency of a code in the documents.

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Appendix Document list

- (1)–(6): University statutes
- (7)–(13): University codes of ethics
- (14)–(26) and (28)–(35): Study regulations
- (27): Decision on the minimum criteria for selecting mentors
- (36)–(39): Regulations and decisions on final, master thesis and/or paper or work
- (40)–(45): Regulations on rewarding excellence
- (46)–(50): Work regulations
- (1) Statut Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku (2023)
- (2) Statut Sveučilišta u Dubrovniku (Pročišćeni tekst) (2022)
- (3) Statut Sveučilišta u Rijeci (2023)
- (4) Statut Sveučilišta u Slavonskom Brodu (2023)
- (5) Statut Sveučilišta u Splitu (pročišćeni tekst) (2021)
- (6) Statut Sveučilišta u Zagrebu (2023)
- (7) Etički kodeks Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku (2011)
- (8) Etički kodeks Sveučilišta Jurja Dobrile u Puli (2008)
- (9) Etički kodeks Sveučilišta Sjever
- (10) Etički kodeks Sveučilišta u Rijeci (2018)
- (11) Etički kodeks za studentice/studente Sveučilišta u Rijeci
- (12) Etički kodeks Sveučilišta u Splitu (2009)

- (13) Etički kodeks (2007)
- (14) Pravilnik o studijima i studiranju na Sveučilištu Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku (2015)
- (15) Pravilnik o studiranju (2020)
- (16) Pravilnik o studijima i studiranju na Sveučilištu u Dubrovniku (2021)
- (17) Pravilnik o studijima Sveučilišta u Rijeci (pročišćeni tekst) (2020)
- (18) Pravilnik o studiranju na Sveučilištu u Slavanskom Brodu (2020)
- (19) Pravilnik o studijima i sustavu studiranja na Sveučilištu u Splitu (2020)
- (20) Pravilnik o studijima i studiranju (2023)
- (21) Pravilnik o poslijediplomskim studijima na Sveučilištu Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku (pročišćeni tekst) (2018),
- (22) Pravilnik o međunarodnim dvojnim doktoratima (2018)
- (23) Pravilnik o poslijediplomskim sveučilišnim studijima (doktorskim studijima) na Sveučilištu Jurja Dobrile u Puli (2017)
- (24) Pravilnik o poslijediplomskim specijalističkim studijima Sveučilišta Jurja Dobrile u Puli (2014)
- (25) Pravilnik o poslijediplomskim sveučilišnim studijima (doktorskim studijima) na Sveučilištu Sjever – pročišćeni tekst (2019)
- (26) Pravilnik o poslijediplomskim sveučilišnim (doktorskim) studijima Sveučilišta u Rijeci (2020)
- (27) Odluka o utvrđivanju minimalnih kriterija za odabir mentora na poslijediplomskim sveučilišnim studijima Sveučilišta u Rijeci (2019)
- (28) Pravilnik o poslijediplomskim studijima Sveučilišta u Slavanskom Brodu (2022)
- (29) Pravilnik o međunarodnim dvojnim doktoratima znanosti (2012)
- (30) Pravilnik o doktorskim studijima (2023)
- (31) Pravilnik o međunarodnom dvojnem doktoratu znanosti (2018)
- (32) Pravilnik o specijalističkim studijima (2023)
- (33) Pravilnik o poslijediplomskim specijalističkim studijima Sveučilišta u Zagrebu (2010)
- (34) Pravilnik o doktorskim studijima na Sveučilištu u Zagrebu (pročišćeni tekst) (2016)
- (35) Pravilnik o međunarodnim dvojnim doktoratima znanosti (2008)
- (36) Pravilnik o diplomskom radu i diplomskom koncertu na sveučilišnim diplomskim i integriranom preddiplomskom i diplomskom studiju (pročišćeni tekst) (2019)
- (37) Pravilnik o završnom i diplomskom radu na studijskim programima Sveučilišta Sjever (2020)
- (38) Pravilnik o Završnom projektu, Završnom radu i Diplomskom radu na Sveučilištu u Slavanskom Brodu (2021)
- (39) Odluka o diplomskom radu studenta na diplomskom studiju (pročišćeni tekst) (2017)
- (40) Pravilnik o dodjeli Rektorove nagrade (2015)
- (41) Pravilnik o dodjeli priznanja Sveučilišta u Dubrovniku (Pročišćeni tekst) (2022)
- (42) Pravilnik o nagrađivanju izvrsnosti nastavnika i suradnika Sveučilišta u Slavanskom Brodu (2020)
- (43) Pravilnik o dodjeli pohvala uspješnim studentima (2022)
- (44) Pravilnik o nagrađivanju izvrsnosti djelatnika Sveučilišta u Zadru (2020)

- (45) Pravilnik o dodjeli rektorove nagrade (pročišćeni tekst) (2023)
- (46) Pravilnik o radu (2015)
- (47) Pravilnik o unutarnjem ustroju i sistematizaciji položaja i radnih mjesta (2022)
- (48) Pravilnik o radu (2015)
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