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Adopting a ‘bifocal approach’ in Swiss academic mentoring programmes – challenges and opportunities

Abstract

Mentoring programmes have been accused of inadequately addressing organisations’ gendered cultures. In reaction to this, mentoring approaches started applying a dual focus, i. e. targetting both individual development and organisational change. This paper explores – through the lens of the ‘bifocal approach’ – whether and how two Swiss academic mentoring programmes for female advanced doctoral students and early postdoctoral scholars have adopted a dual focus. The paper shows that the programmes have developed strategies adopting this approach to a certain extent and discusses the challenges and opportunities experienced.

Keywords

Approaches to mentoring, mentoring programmes, gender equality, career development, Higher Education systems

Ein „bifokaler Ansatz“ für akademisches Mentoring im Schweizer Kontext – Herausforderungen und Chancen

Zusammenfassung

Auf die Kritik, Mentoring-Programme würden vergeschlechtlichte Organisationskulturen ungenügend thematisieren, wurde mit Mentoring-Ansätzen reagiert, die einen doppelten Fokus verfolgen, d. h. auf persönliche Entwicklung wie auch auf Organisationswandel abzielen. Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht – durch die Brille des „bifokalen Ansatzes“ –, ob und wie zwei Schweizer Mentoring-Programme für Postdoktorandinnen und fortgeschrittene Doktorandinnen einen doppelten Fokus bisher umgesetzt haben. Der Artikel zeigt, dass die Programme einen solchen Ansatz teilweise angewendet haben und diskutiert die Herausforderungen und Chancen.

Schlüsselwörter

Mentoringansätze, Mentoring-Programme, Chancengleichheit von Frauen und Männern, Nachwuchsförderung, Hochschulsysteme

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1 Introduction

Starting in the 1990s, the implementation of mentoring programmes has become a popular gender equality strategy of European universities (FÜGER & HÖPPEL, 2011, p. 4). During the past decades however, mentoring programmes with a focus on women mentees have been accused of sustaining discriminating structures in academia by supporting women to ‘fit in’ instead of challenging the gendered organisational culture (MEYERSON & KOLB, 2000). Criticism points out that programmes have tended to construct women as those in need of ‘fixing’, without addressing organisations’ need for transformational change (SCHIEBINGER, 2008).

Mentoring programmes reacted to this critique by increasingly adapting new approaches and re-aligning their goals to support gender equality in a more comprehensive way. One of the adaptations is to target not only women, but also other and more senior organisational members, such as male and female mentors. At a theoretical level DE VRIES (2011b, 2012) coined the term ‘bifocal approach’ to mentoring, invoking thereby the necessity to maintain a simultaneous focus on individual and organisational change. Adopting a ‘bifocal approach’, she argues, helps reshaping women-only mentoring programmes “*towards becoming vehicles for building more gender equitable workplaces*” (DE VRIES, 2012, p. 105). The term ‘bifocal approach’ signals that programme strategies, designs and implementation can pursue a dual focus. According to DE VRIES (2011b), mentoring programmes are ideally placed to adopt a ‘bifocal approach’.

Interventions that aim at supporting women academics in their academic careers are influenced by specificities of the prevalent academic career model. A key aspect of the Swiss higher education system is that academic career trajectories hardly take place within one organisation.² While internal career tracks are integral to the tenure model (prominent in the UK) and a realistic option in tenure-track models (prominent in the US), formal or informal bans on internal appointments (Hausberufungsverbot) have been characteristic for the Habilitation model (prominent in German-speaking Switzerland, Germany and Austria) so far (KRECKEL, 2008, pp. 247-251). Further, the relation of professors to other academic staff is much lower in Switzerland, Germany and Austria (13-19 %) than e.g. in the US (80 %) (KRECKEL, 2008, pp. 202, pp. 355). While mentoring programmes in Australia and the US focus mainly on mentoring inside one organisation, i. e. on the mentoring of junior faculty by senior faculty of the same organisation (LUNSFORD et al., 2013; DUTTA et al., 2011; LUMPKIN, 2011; GARDINER et al., 2007), the programmes presented in this paper work with several organisations.

Against this background, the paper asks, on the one hand, whether and how a ‘bifocal approach’ has been applied by Swiss mentoring programmes in support of women’s academic careers and, on the other hand, whether there are any specific opportunities and challenges in applying a ‘bifocal approach’ to mentoring in the

² This paper focuses on Swiss doctoral/research universities (i. e. the cantonal universities and the federal institutes of technology). It does not reflect the situation at universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education.

particular higher education environment. The aim of the paper is to contribute to a broader understanding of mentoring approaches and of challenges and opportunities that emerge in various higher education systems. This is also to respond to ZELLERS et al. (2008) call for more contextualised analysis of academic mentoring.

This paper begins with an outline of the two mentoring programmes that have jointly been offered by all Swiss Higher Education Institutions since 2000 in order to promote female early career researchers. This is followed by a methodology section. Subsequently, the paper outlines how the two portrayed mentoring programmes address individual and structural levels for inducing gender change in academia. It further discusses challenges and opportunities experienced with the designing and implementation of a ‘bifocal approach’ to mentoring in the Swiss context. It concludes that the experience gained from Swiss academic mentoring programmes can yield valuable insights for programmes in other higher education environments, particularly in times of changing promotion models.

2 Methodology

In the following, I draw on two Swiss mentoring programmes for female advanced doctoral students and early postdoctoral scholars to explore the interplay between mentoring approach and higher education system. I have chosen ‘Mentoring Deutschschweiz’ (MDCH) and the ‘Réseau romand de mentoring pour femmes’ (RRM) because of two reasons: First, these mentoring programmes are two of the oldest, longest standing mentoring programmes in the Swiss academic environment, they are well-documented and have been developed as jointly operating sister programmes servicing all Swiss doctoral/research universities. This provides a good empirical basis. Second, I – the author – am currently (since April 2012) the manager of ‘Mentoring Deutschschweiz’ which allows me to have access to a wide range of observational/participatory data and (formal and informal) programme documents of ‘Mentoring Deutschschweiz’ and to some extent also of the ‘Réseau romand’ through my exchange with the managers of that programme.

In order to develop my argumentation, I draw on three main sources of data: participant observation, programme documents and (formal and informal) discussions with current and former programme managers that I have had in the past in my role as practitioner, not explicitly as author of this article. In order to explore how the Swiss mentoring programmes have defined and pursued a gender change agenda at different levels so far, I use the analytical framework that DE VRIES (2013) developed – on the basis of her ‘bifocal approach’ – to explore different transformative interventions in Scandinavia.

3 Two mentoring programmes offered jointly by the Swiss higher education institutions

The two programmes have both been implemented in the framework of a federal equal opportunity strategy. In order to contribute to the promotion of gender

equality at Swiss universities, the federal government sponsored the Swiss Federal Equal Opportunity at Universities Program between 2000 and 2013. One of the programme's modules was called 'Mentoring programmes for the promotion of female junior researchers'. 'Mentoring' was broadly defined (MÜLLER et al., 2007, p. 7), leading to a total of 39 very different mentoring projects that were included in this module³.

Two mentoring programmes within this mentoring module were implemented as cooperation projects involving all Swiss universities jointly, represented through their Equal Opportunities (EO) offices: 'Mentoring Deutschschweiz' (MDCH) addressed – as mentees – postdoctoral scholars and advanced doctoral students of the universities in the German-speaking part of Switzerland incl. the bilingual University of Fribourg, the ETH Zurich (until 2012) and the Università della Svizzera italiana (since 2012); the 'Réseau romand de mentoring pour femmes' (RRM) addressed postdoctoral scholars and advanced doctoral students of the universities in the French-speaking part of Switzerland incl. the University of Fribourg and the Università della Svizzera italiana. Since 2006, the two programmes together are financially supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

The key element of the two programmes are the one-to-one mentoring partnerships of early career researchers (mentees) and professors (mentors) and 4-5 accompanying career relevant workshops for the mentees (see FÜGER & BESSON, 2008 and LASK & GRAF, 2008). The programmes last 2 years (1.5 years for the mentees). So far, a total of 7 cycles for each programme have been implemented between 2000 and 2014. In each cycle, around 30 early career researchers have been selected by 'Mentoring Deutschschweiz' and roughly 25 by the 'Réseau romand'. These mentees are institutionally affiliated to one of the participating universities and work in different disciplines.

Potential mentors are approached on the basis of the early career researchers' individual convenience. In order to enlarge networks between early career researchers and professors – usually highly relevant when it comes to research collaboration and job applications –, the programmes explicitly encourage mentees to approach potential mentors outside their own university and already established contacts. Mentors are thus selected not only from the partner institutions, yet also from other higher education institutions in Switzerland and even abroad. In contrast to mentoring programmes that focus exclusively on mentoring within a single organisation and in one national/cultural context with its specific social policies and gender regimes, MDCH and RRM have to deal with a much more complex setting. This poses specific challenges and opportunities when it comes to the question of how the structural dimension of gender inequality in academia can be addressed.

Even though the core aspects of 'Mentoring Deutschschweiz' and 'Réseau romand' have remained the same over the last 14 years, the two programmes have developed with each phase. The two mentoring programmes have made necessary adjustments to the changing academic environment in which doctorate studies have

³ <http://www.crus.ch/information-programme/programme-cus-p-4-equal-opportunity-gender-studies/modul-2-nachwuchsfoerderung.html?L=2>

become more formalised, supervision practices have changed to reduce PhD candidates' dependency on a single person, the universities' quality management strategies and practices have become more gender-aware and in which new support structures are provided by institutions such as the Swiss National Science Foundation (e. g. the '120 % support grant') and Euresearch (e. g. webinars and workshops for EU grants applicants). This has led to adjustment in areas such as workshop contents and criteria for the mentees' selection.

4 Exploring the two mentoring programmes through the lens of de Vries' 'bifocal approach'

The two complementary programmes 'Mentoring Deutschschweiz' and the 'Réseau romand de mentoring pour femmes' were originally conceptualised to support women as individuals in successfully pursuing their academic career. This has never kept the programmes off from scrutinising and criticising gendered structures (FÜGER, 2005, p. 164). The programmes have adopted various strategies to address the structural dimension of women's underrepresentation in the highest level of academia. Pursuing innovative gender change strategies in mentoring has been and will remain particularly important for cooperation programmes who recruit mentors from outside one single organisation. Table 1 provides an overview of the mentoring approach of 'Mentoring Deutschschweiz' and the 'Réseau romand de mentoring pour femmes', exploring whether and how a 'bifocal approach' has been adapted.

Table 1: Mentoring approach of 'Mentoring Deutschschweiz' and the 'Réseau romand de mentoring pour femmes'

Intervention Categories (following DE VRIES, 2013)	Mentoring Deutschschweiz (MDCH) – Programmes 1-7 (2000-2014) Réseau romand de mentoring pour femmes (RRM) – Programmes 1-7 (2000-2014)
	Intervention approach
	<p>Individual development of mentees and the development of collective women's networks at regional level has been central (MÜLLER et al., 2007).</p> <p>Male/female professors (who serve as mentors) are targeted as well. Yet goals for mentors have been formulated rather vaguely. If specified, the goals are that mentors gain insight into the situation of an early career researchers and her experiences of gendered structures (MDCH & DRACK, 2005, p. 101), that female professors enhance experiences and expertise as mentors (RRM; FÜGER & BESSON, 2008, p. 32) and that mentors create networks and use the space created by the programme to exchange experience, e. g. on their role and function as supervisors, gender equality policies in their respective institutions, and strategies to support them (RRM, FÜGER & BESSON, 2008, p. 29).</p> <p>The structural dimension is addressed, more than at the organisational level, at the level of formal federal university politics where the programmes aim to contribute to discussions on gender sensible support for career advancement at Swiss universities (FÜGER, 2005, p. 168).</p>

Model of change: Theoretical model and how this is operationalised	<p>Implementation of the interventions (as part of the bigger Swiss Federal Equal Opportunity at Universities Program) as one way of working towards structural change (FÜGER, 2005).</p> <p>Development of individual's gender insight (early career women researchers and male and female professors who serve as mentors) through engagement with the programme.</p> <p>Institutionalisation of the recognition of mentoring at the organisational level, i. e. explicit mentioning of mentoring duties in professors' job specifications (FÜGER & BESSON, 2008, p. 34).</p>
Organisational access: How the intervention was framed/sold to the organisation(s)	<p>Initially, as two of the first academic mentoring programmes in Switzerland, they were majorly framed as pioneer projects towards the participating universities and the wider public.</p> <p>By now, external funding (through the Federal programme) is used to "sell" the interventions to the participating organisations. However, for securing the universities' matching funds, each EO office chooses an individual way of how to sell the respective programme to its organisation. These ways depend on how the EO office is embedded in the university structure. Additionally, some EO offices provide their share through an own lump-sum budget (Globalbudget), while others have to e. g. ask the president (Rektor) for project funding.</p>
Partners and partnership building: Who and how?	<p><u>EO officers (and professors) from different Higher Education Institutions</u></p> <p>One EO officer from each of the partner institutions (MDCH) and an EO officer and one or two (women) professors from each of the partner institutions (RRM) constitute the "board of partners" that provides back-up to the programme management.</p> <p><u>Mentees</u></p> <p>Mentees of MDCH and RRM are addressed by the programme management as partners for gender change through information on gendered structures in academia and on how to use mentoring relationships in different ways (instrumental, developmental, transformative; cf. DE VRIES, 2011b).</p> <p><u>Professors</u></p> <p>Male and female professors who serve as mentors are addressed by the programme management as partners for gender change through information material and (up to now only little) reference literature on gendered structures in academia. In RRM, male and female professors are also invited to workshops where they can take part as participants, moderators and experts.</p> <p>RRM was initially conceptualised as a network of women professors and early career academics, yet the focus on women only mentors was abandoned early on (FÜGER, 2005, p. 162).</p> <p><u>Others</u></p> <p>RRM's programme management involves an inter-university group of EO officers and professors for the selection of mentees (BESSON & FÜGER, 2011, p. 42).</p> <p>The two programmes cooperate with the Swiss National Science Foundation SNSF (the SNSF supports the two programmes jointly; they are the only mentoring programmes to be financially supported by the SNSF)</p>
Sustainability of the change effort	<p>Sustainability of intervention is variable. Even though implemented during 14 years (7 cycles each), the programmes were never fully financed by the partner institutions but depended on third-party funding by the Federal Programme and SNSF).</p> <p>With the ending of the financial support by the Federal Programme in 2016, the universities need to rethink whether and how they want to sustainably institutionalise the funding of the programmes at their university/EO office.</p> <p>Sustainability of individual change is variable since individuals engage in different ways in gender change. However, the programmes seem to supporting gender-sensible leadership among mentors and mentees (some of whom are already mentors to Master-/PhD students or will become mentors in the future).</p>

	<p>Sustainability of knowledge transfer has been pursued through the publication of two career guides: “Getting your thesis” and “Beyond the doctorate” (published in French, English and German). The guides are based on the experiences of RRM and MDCH and make career information available to a broader audience (incl. men and women).</p> <p>Knowledge has been transferred from MDCH and RRM to other mentoring programmes, e. g. through the sharing of literature, guidelines and material for mentees and mentors.</p>
Transformative intervention?	Only few organisational members of the participating institutions (usually EO officers and the professors who participated as mentors) have engaged with the programmes.
Outcomes: individual, organisational and supra-organisational	The programmes seem to be most successful in their work with women mentees. Evaluations show that women have benefitted from one-to-one and peer networking as well as skills development through workshops.
	So far, RRM has involved mentors in a more intense way than MDCH, which increases the likelihood that the mentoring experience sensitizes mentors for gendered structures and encourages them for gender change. However, it remains unclear how gender relations and gender change are discussed in the individual mentoring partnerships and how mentees achieve to engage men and women professors from different organisations (not necessarily partner organisations and Swiss universities) as partners for organizational change.
	Organisational outcomes are difficult to measure: Evaluations have tended to focus on individual outcomes for mentees and only marginally on outcomes for mentors so far. Since mentees, mentors and collaborators are affiliated with more than one organisation, evaluations are more difficult than in programmes with participants from one organisation only.
	The two programmes have contributed to the development of policies and instruments in support of early career academics at individual universities, the SNSF and in federal politics.
Noteworthy/interesting	<p>The programmes are part of the much bigger Swiss Federal Equal Opportunity at Universities Program through which other interventions are implemented at the same universities.</p> <p>The programmes are organised as cooperation of several universities. They have own agendas and offer various interventions that add to and – at its best – complement MDCH and RRM.</p>
Strengths	The programmes’ organisation as a cooperation reduces competition for professors who serve as mentors for mentees of other organisations, supports cooperation between EO offices and helps to strategically position gender change claims at formal-political levels.

The findings presented in Table 1 illustrate the programmes’ mentoring approach. On the basis of this analysis, the next section will provide an exploratory discussion of opportunities and challenges in applying a ‘bifocal approach’ to mentoring in the particular higher education environment of Switzerland.

5 Exploring challenges and opportunities experienced in addressing the structural dimension

When looking at the two Swiss mentoring programmes through the lens of DE VRIES’ ‘bifocal approach’, I see three main challenges.

A first challenge is the fact that the programmes do neither limit themselves to one organisation nor to one politico-cultural context when searching for mentors. Therefore, the question emerges of how to adequately address geographically dispersed mentors and organisations. It is hardly possible to motivate and financially

support mentors from abroad (also overseas) to join the mentee group for workshops. It is also challenging to adequately address organisational dimensions when mentors are affiliated with organisations that are embedded in environments that are diverse in relation to career models, higher education policies and gender regimes. Where I see a potential to make better use of mentors as possible agents for change is to intensify the communication between the programme managements and them. ‘Mentoring Deutschschweiz’ and the ‘Réseau romand de mentoring pour femmes’ have experimented with mailing lists for mentees through which the programme managements as well as the participating mentees share information about call for proposals, publications about gender and academia, guidelines for mentoring etc. A next step could be that the programme managements operate additional lists for mentors and encourage the groups of mentors and the groups of mentees to interact through the lists.

A second challenge is the fact that academic mentoring and career support programmes in German-speaking Europe need to adapt their activities and goals to the particular academic employment situation. The question emerges how programmes can constructively support early career researchers, being simultaneously conscious about gender imbalances in professorial hiring and the fact that at the end, only very few academics will achieve a stable academic position. At universities in Switzerland, Germany and Austria, it has been considered normal that scholars live on fixed-term contracts without long-term prospects until recruited to an associate or full professorship. This challenge is somehow addressed by the two programmes in their organisation as cooperation of several institutions and the recruitment of mentors from organisations outside the partner universities. Contacts established through such mentoring partnerships may open up important networks to mentees beyond the academic systems that are characterised by the Habilitation model.

A third challenge lies in the fact that gender change happens in complex ways and is difficult to track, above all if many different organizations are involved. The question emerges how the programmes’ contributions to structural change can be assessed and made visible in the current situation in which funding agencies (incl. partner institutions) ask for concrete evidence of success. Also DE VRIES (2011a, p. 13) calls for “evaluations against objectives”, which means that if goals for mentors, organisations and institutions/politics are defined, outcomes at these levels should be evaluated. This is of course desirable, but the implementation is tricky for at least two reasons: First, most evaluations that are based on qualitative data are limited to positivist interpretations. They look at participants’ statements without analysing the wider discursive context in which they are embedded. However, a failure to contextualise subjective evaluations can lead to wrong conclusions (LÖTHER, 2012). In order to understand programme outcomes beyond participants’ statements, more nuanced analyses of qualitative data would be needed. However, these require time and financial resources (and skills) that are usually not available to programme managements. Second, most evaluations based on quantitative data are limited to short-term outcomes. Literature shows that it is not easy to track long-term outcomes of mentoring programmes even at the level of the mentees. BLAU et al. (2010) and GARDINER (2007) have conducted time- and finance-intensive research in order to track long-term changes. Such quantitative analyses

require time and financial resources (and skills) that are usually not available to programme managements.

Despite these challenges, I see also three opportunities for the two programmes to move forward in working towards organisational change.

First, even if an intervention is not integrated into one single organization, it can still work towards structural change since “*building the gender knowledge of individual men and women is very different to the liberal focus on (fixing) women*” (DEVRIES, 2013, p. 159). This means that – in addition to the programme design – the contents of interactions and the philosophy on which the programme is based are of crucial importance. The two programmes e. g. support mentees to operate as multipliers towards peers, more advanced researchers (mentor, supervisor, other professors) and less advanced researchers (Master and PhD students) in their academic (and non-academic) environments; and they support mentors to operate as multipliers (‘tempered radical’, cf. MEYERSON & SCULLY, 1995) towards peers at the professorial level, postdoctoral scholars and PhD candidates.

Second, the formal mentoring relationships that are established within the two programmes are just one part of mentoring constellations (‘multiple mentoring’) and thus not the only structure for mentees and mentors and no substitute of informal mentoring. The concept of multiple mentoring “*encourages individuals to draw support from a diverse set or team of mentors*” (ZELLERS et al., 2008, p. 563). Mentoring – at its best – provides new perspectives to mentees and mentors and thus works towards making visible the ‘big picture’ including systematic gender differences.

Third, the organisation of the two programmes as state-wide cooperation constitutes a great opportunity to enlarge (or shift) the focus from an ‘organisational’ gender change agenda towards a ‘(formal) political’ gender change agenda. Evidence from the past shows that several stakeholders from the two mentoring programmes have been engaged in national and international networks where they worked towards redefining and realigning gender change interventions incl. mentoring programmes (LERU, 2012; FÜGER & HÖPPEL, 2011; NÖBAUER & GENETTI, 2008).

6 Conclusion

This article explored some of the challenges and opportunities of adopting a ‘bifocal approach’ to mentoring in higher education contexts where career advancement and promotions usually do not happen in a single organisation. By drawing on two Swiss programmes, the paper identified challenges when it comes to addressing mentors in various contexts as agents for gender change, encouraging women to advance academically while stable job perspectives are limited, and tracking long-term individual and structural outcomes without adequate resources. The two programmes also show that building gender knowledge of individuals, encouraging mentees for ‘multiple mentoring’, and networking beyond one organisation provide opportunities for working towards structural gender change.

With its focus, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of mentoring approaches as well as their context-specific operationalization in higher education systems. The findings reported in this paper provide insights that are relevant beyond the Swiss context. Academic careers and promotion models are changing worldwide. It has e. g. been reported that assistant professors in the USA and Australia are increasingly employed on a temporary basis and without a tenure-track option and thus without a clear career perspective (KRECKEL, 2010, p. 248; BEXLEY, JAMES & ARKOUDIS, 2011). Mentoring programmes around the world will need to rethink how they can address these new situations. One way is to continue the exchange and networking at the international level, e. g. through the eument-net network of academic mentoring programmes in Europe.

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