

Mentorship through Role Modelling: Influencing Young Academic Careers

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of role modelling, as a mentorship practice, on the career development of young academics in Tanzania's higher learning institutions (HLIs). The motivation for the study stems from increasing evidence that protégés encounter significant developmental challenges, for which mentorship has been identified as a critical intervention. Despite this recognition, there remains a limited empirical understanding of the extent to which role modelling contributes to shaping academic career trajectories. The study was grounded in Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and employed a quantitative research approach within a cross-sectional design. The targeted population was 776 young academic staff, mainly Tutorial Assistants and Assistant Lecturers from three public universities in Tanzania. Stratified sampling techniques were used to select representatives from each university. Data was collected from 242 participants through structured questionnaires. The reliability of the questionnaire was estimated using Cronbach's alpha method. The instrument was reliable as its coefficient was 0.936 in 12 items. Descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression were used for analysis. The findings revealed that role modelling has a positive effect on academic career development ($\beta = 0.53372$, $p < .0001$). The study concludes that protégés should be intentional in selecting mentors who demonstrate both competence and commitment, while institutions should strengthen mentorship structures through formalized policies and gender-responsive programmes.

Keywords: Role Modelling; Mentorship; Protégés; Academic Career Development; Higher Learning Institution

Introduction

The development of young academics in higher learning institutions (HLIs) has emerged as a critical concern in contemporary scholarship (Zacher et al., 2019). In many developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, early-career academics face numerous challenges that limit their professional growth, including heavy teaching workloads, limited research exposure, inadequate mentorship, and constrained institutional support (Ishengoma, 2021; Mgaiwa, 2021). These constraints threaten both individual career trajectories and the long-term sustainability of HLIs, which depend on a steady pipeline of skilled and motivated scholars. Since career reflects the sequence of work-related roles individuals occupy over time, career development involves the preparations and progression required to move from one level to another (Hoekstra, 2011).

Within higher learning institutions, academic career development occurs in different ways, including nurturing scholars from junior to senior ranks and, more often, cultivating young talent to excel in teaching, research, and consultancy (Zacher et al., 2018). Studies indicate that early-career academics frequently encounter a wide range of professional strains during this transition, including difficulties in effective classroom management, adapting to institutional culture and expectations, balancing teaching, research, administrative responsibilities, community engagement, as well as meeting the increasing demand for scholarly productivity and professional performance (Diggs-Andrews et al., 2021; Paposa & Chhibber, 2020; Hairon et al., 2020).

Mentorship, and more specifically role modelling, has been increasingly recognized as a strategic mechanism for addressing these challenges (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Role models provide protégés with guidance, professional identity formation, motivation, and behavioral examples to emulate, thereby fostering academic competence and institutional commitment. In contemporary academic environments, young academics are expected to simultaneously establish their professional identity and develop pedagogical competence that will define them as academics. Grounded in Lev Vygotsky's Social Cognitive Theory, individual cognitive development is understood to occur initially within a social plane through observation, interaction and guided learning from More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), before being internalized at the individual level as part of one's competence and professional capability (Shabani, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

In the Tanzanian context, despite the acknowledged importance of mentorship and role modeling in supporting early-career academics, there remains a persistent gap in how effectively these mechanisms are implemented within academic institutions to adequately address the professional and pedagogical development needs of young academics. As a result, many early academics continue to experience a persistence gap in human resource capacity, gender imbalances in academic advancement, and the demand for improved teaching, research, and community engagement outputs in universities (URT, 2020). While the literature acknowledges the value of mentorship, limited empirical evidence exists on the extent to which role modelling shapes the academic career development of young scholars. This study, therefore, focuses on examining the extent to which role modelling as a mentorship practice influences the academic career development of young academic staff in Tanzanian HLIs, with an emphasis on its implications for professional growth and institutional sustainability.

Our central research question, therefore, asks:

To what extent does role modelling influence the academic career development of young academic staff?

Literature Review

Conceptualization of the Study

Understanding how mentorship influences the careers of junior academics require examining the interrelated concepts of mentorship, role modelling, protégés, academic career development, and Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs). Mentorship is a developmental relationship in which a senior academic provides guidance, knowledge, and support to less experienced colleagues, facilitating professional growth (Demaria, 2020; Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Central to mentorship is role modelling, through which mentors demonstrate professional behaviours, values, and competencies that protégés observe, internalise, and emulate (Gibson, 2004; Kram, 1983). Role modelling can be explicit, where mentors intentionally demonstrate behaviours and provide structured guidance, or implicit, where protégés learn by observing mentors' routine professional practices (Shapiro et al., 1978).

Protégés, as early-career academics, actively engage with mentors by observing, imitating, and adapting practices, shaping their professional skills, confidence, and resilience (Allen & Eby, 2007). Academic career development refers to the structured progression of academics across teaching, research, consultancy, and community engagement, encompassing skill acquisition, professional identity formation, and career resilience (Hoekstra, 2011; Zacher et al., 2018).

Higher Learning Institutions provide the institutional context that shapes mentorship opportunities, offering structures, policies, and cultures that facilitate or constrain the effectiveness of role modelling (Mushemeza, 2016). The interconnections are mutually reinforcing: HLIs establish the environment for mentorship; mentorship is operationalized through role modelling; protégés actively engage with and internalise the behaviours and skills demonstrated by role models; and this interaction accelerates academic career development.

Thus, mentorship through role modelling acts as a strategic lever within HLIs, fostering the next generation of academic leaders. By connecting institutional support, mentor expertise, and protégé engagement, this approach enhances teaching effectiveness, research capacity, and professional satisfaction. Structured role modelling not only transfers technical knowledge but also strengthens professional identity, intergenerational knowledge sharing, and institutional academic culture, ensuring sustainable academic development.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is guided by Vygotsky's Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and educator (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory posits that at early stages, individuals rely heavily on more knowledgeable and experienced members of their social environment, like parents, teachers, or caregivers, who initiate behaviours, decision-making, and learning. Through observation, imitation, and interaction with these More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), individuals internalise norms, values, and cognitive strategies, progressively developing thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities (Shabani, 2016; Topçiu & Myftiu, 2015). This framework assumes that cognitive development begins socially, occurring on the interpersonal plane, and later becomes internalised on the individual plane, forming part of the learner's competence (Vygotsky, 1978; Shabani, 2016).

A central concept in Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights the potential for learners to perform tasks beyond their current independent capacity through guided support from MKOs (Topçiu & Myftiu, 2015). ZPD emphasizes the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with mentorship and scaffolding. In the context of Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs), junior academic staff such as Tutorial Assistants and Assistant Lecturers engage in cognitive and professional growth through structured interaction with senior academics (lecturers, senior lecturers, and professors), who serve as MKOs (URT, 2019; URT, 2022).

Within this study, mentorship through role modelling operationalises Vygotsky's assumptions. Mentors model professional behaviours, guide research activities, and provide scaffolding support, enabling protégés to develop skills in teaching, research, consultancy, and other academic functions. For example, during teaching sessions, senior lecturers demonstrate pedagogical strategies, class management, and assessment techniques, which junior staff observe, imitate, and internalise, thereby enhancing both their competence and confidence. Such guided modelling not only strengthens individual career development but also contributes to institutional teaching quality. This not only builds confidence and competence in the junior staff but also influences students' ability and understanding of the subject matter. Thus;

H₁: Role modelling has a significant influence on protégés' academic career development in the selected HLIs.

Strengths of the Theory

There is a slight conceptual mix framing While role modelling is directly grounded in Bandura's Social cognitive theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory focuses on learning through social interaction, mediation and the Zone of Proximal Development. in practice many studies have combined ideas from both to complement each other in explaining academic career development. one major strength of Vygotsky social cultural theory is its strong explanation of how learning is socially constructed. In the context of role modelling, it clearly explains how proteges develop academically through interaction with more knowledgeable and experienced individuals such as supervisors, senior academics, or mentors. The Zone of Proximal Development is particularly useful because it shows that early career academics can achieve a higher level of academic performance when guided by competent role models. Therefore, supervision, mentoring, and observation of senior scholars are constructively done, shaping research skills, publishing behavior, and professional identity.

Moreover, the theory adds mechanisms of observational learning by recognizing the importance of the environment and social context, which is directly relevant to role modeling. Proteges not only learn through instructions, but also through observation, attitude, research habits, and professional behavior of their role models, and improve their academic competencies and performance. For example, a junior staff member who observes a professor on how he/she structures research grant proposals, he/she not only learns how to improve their research capabilities but also builds confidence and resilience; instead of giving up observing and interacting.

Weakness of the Theory

Despite the role of this theory in explaining cognitive learning of junior academic staff in their career paths, the theory lacks a holistic understanding to explain other issues that influence learning. It underemphasizes

individual agency (behavioral learning) and personal motivation that are relevant in the learning process. In academic career development, proteges are not purely shaped by social interaction; however, their intrinsic motivation, resilience, and personal goals also play a significant role in learning, which the theory does not fully explain. So, this theory restricts itself to the internal part of learning that learners actively process information and construct knowledge through understanding, reasoning, and insight, rather than other factors like reinforcements, external stimuli, and rewards.

Application of Vygotsky's Theory in HLIs in the Tanzanian Context

As you may recall, Vygotsky's Social Cognitive Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) posits that learning and cognitive development occur through social interaction with More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), who provide guidance, modelling, and scaffolding. This framework is particularly relevant in Tanzanian higher education, where junior academic staff rely on senior lecturers and professors to acquire the knowledge, skills, and professional behaviours necessary for career development. Higher education in Tanzania has evolved significantly since the establishment of the University of Dar es Salaam in 1961, initially affiliated with the University of London. The liberalisation policies of the 2000s accelerated the expansion of universities from one in 1961 to 49 by 2024, offering both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (Fussy, 2024a; TCU, 2023). Tanzanian universities are pivotal to national development, providing advanced education, research, and professional training that cultivate human capital for socio-economic transformation (Ishengoma, 2017; Ishengoma, 2023). Higher education institutions in Tanzania are broadly categorised into universities and middle-level tertiary institutions, differing in mandates, academic scope, and regulatory oversight (TCU, 2023; TCU, 2024; Fussy, 2024). This study focuses on universities, which operate under the regulation of the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) and are responsible for producing scholars, policy makers, and specialised practitioners essential to national growth.

Academic staff in Tanzania range from Tutorial Assistants and Assistant Lecturers at lower levels to Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors, and Professors at higher ranks. Male staff dominate the workforce, highlighting ongoing gender imbalances, particularly at senior levels. The high proportion of junior staff underscores the critical need for structured mentorship through role modelling to develop the next generation of academics. Effective mentorship enables junior staff to observe, imitate, and internalise professional behaviours and competencies, aligning closely with Vygotsky's concept of MKOs and the Zone of Proximal Development (URT, 2019; URT, 2022). For example:

Table 1: Tanzanian Higher Education Staffing by 2023/2024 & 2024/2025

2023/2024 Academic Year				2024/2025 Academic year			
Post	Male	Female	Total	Post	Male	Female	Total
Tutorial Assistant (Bachelor's degree)	1,104	512	1,616	Tutorial Assistant (Bachelor's degree)	986	485	1,471
Assistant Lecturer (Master's degree)	2,972	1,395	4,367	Assistant Lecturer (Master's degree)	2,825	1,428	4,253
PhD (Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors, and Professors)	1,932	710	2,642	PhD (Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors, and Professors)	2,198	787	2,985

Source: TCU (2024, 2025)

Empirical studies highlight the significance of role models in academic career development. Role models inspire motivation, transmit values, and demonstrate professional standards that shape protégés' performance (Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021; Jack et al., 2017; Kearney et al., 2020). For instance, observing senior academics' approaches to teaching, research, and grant writing equips junior staff with practical strategies for career progression. However, findings are context-dependent; Mnasi et al. (2022) note that role modelling may not significantly influence outcomes where institutional support or resources are limited, underscoring the need to embed mentorship practices within organisational structures.

Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative research approach with a cross-sectional design was employed. This allows researchers to collect data from a large sample at a single point in time, thus gaining a comprehensive understanding of the existing mentorship arrangement (role modelling) among young academic staff without manipulating the study environments or following participants over an extended period.

Study Area

The study was conducted in three higher learning institutions in Tanzania, namely Mzumbe University (MU), University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), and Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA). The choice of the three universities was done randomly, whereby the researcher identified the top six universities in Tanzania. Accessed through <https://www.uniranks.com> (Please note that this information is based on the time data were collected and may be subject to change), with the assumption that mentorship practices are considered to be more extensively established and systematically implemented in leading universities compared to lower and mid-tier universities. From the top list of universities, the lottery method was applied to select three universities. It was assumed that mentorship is highly practiced in these top universities compared to other lower and middle-tertiary universities.

Sample Size

Following Yamane's (1969) formula, a sample size of 264 was computed from a total population of 776. Of 264 distributed questionnaires, only 242 were returned and considered for analysis, resulting in a response rate of 91.6%.

Sampling Technique

In this study, a stratified sampling technique was used to ensure that respondents from three universities, UDSM, SUA, and Mzumbe University, were proportionally represented based on their academic positions and colleges, schools/, or faculty they belong to. Since the targeted population was only young academic staff, the population from each university was divided into homogeneous colleges, faculty, or schools, which formed strata. From each stratum, simple random sampling techniques were applied to select the required number of respondents (242 respondents) as shown in Table 2 below: -

Table 2: Stratified Sampling Technique

S/N	University	College, School, and Faculty	Sample size distribution	Percentage (%)
1	MU	School of Public Administration and management -26, School of Business-23, Faculty of Law-11, Faculty of Science and Technology -20, Faculty of Social Science-18, Institute of Development Studies 7, Library services-7	112	46.3
2	SUA	School of Engineering, Science and Technology-25, College of Social Science & Humanities -22, College of Forest and Wildlife Tourism-20, School of Education-15	82	33.9
3	UDSM	University of Dar es Salaam Business School- 20, School of Education-10, College of Natural Science and Applied Science - 10, College of Social Science -8	48	19.8
Total			242	100

Methods of Data Collection

Data was collected through structured questionnaires administered to the selected young academic staff (Tutorial Assistants and Assistant Lecturers). This method allowed the researcher to get standardized and consistent data from the large population. A total of 264 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents through the drop-and-pick method, which ensured data clarity since, wherever needed, the researcher was available to provide clarification.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were conducted using mean, percentage, and standard deviation to determine the understanding of the role modelling influences and academic career development of the protégés. Moreover, multiple linear regression was used to establish how independent variables (Role modelling) influence protégés' academic career development, using SPSS Version 20. Before conducting multiple linear regression, diagnostic tests for normality were computed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov (>0.150), Cramer-Von-Mises (>0.250), and Anderson-Darling-Goodness of fit test (>0.250). Histogram with a normal distribution curve and Q-Q Plot for residual supported normality check. A residual plot was used to check for linearity and homoscedasticity (found significant). Moreover, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to check for Multicollinearity (1.00713-significant). Following the aforementioned explanations, the following formula summarises the multiple regression model adopted:

$$Y = \beta_0 + X_1\beta_1 + X_2\beta_2 + \dots + X_P\beta_P + \epsilon_i$$

Where:

Y =Dependent variable (academic career development),

β_0 = Intercept, $X_1, X_2, \dots, X_P$ Are independent variables (role modelling, Age, Years of experience, and gender)

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_P$ Are the coefficients of the independent variables, and

ϵ_i Is the error

Reliability

In this study, Cronbach's alpha was computed to examine the internal consistency of the instrument. It measures how well a set of variables or items measures a single, one-dimensional latent aspect of individuals. The Cronbach's alpha values range from 0 to 1, whereby values above 0.7 represent an acceptable level of internal reliability. In this study, Cronbach's Alpha was found to be significant (0.936 in 12 items).

Validity

Content validity was ensured through a pilot study and expert review. For example, in quantitative data analysis, a statistician was consulted from the beginning to the end. This gave the room to get the authenticity of the research questions in relation to the study findings.

Ethical Considerations

Before actual data collection, the provided introduction letter served the purpose of informing the selected universities about the intention to conduct this research in their esteemed institutions. Therefore, ethical guidelines were strongly adhered to, such as obtaining a data collection permit from the selected universities. For example, the University of Dar es Salaam confirmed under Reference Number AB.269/319/01, Sokoine University under Reference Number SUA/BC.194/297/01/35, and Mzumbe University under Reference Number AL.3/267/01A/17. The researcher also maintained confidentiality and ensured voluntary participation among respondents. No one was forced to provide data without his or her consent.

Findings

Respondents' General Characteristics

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the respondents in the sample. This distribution shows that the majority of the respondents were aged between 31 and 40, while male young academic staff had a larger proportion than females. Moreover, most young academic staff have less than 5 years of experience, whose mzumbe university found to have a large proportion of respondents compared to other universities. These characteristics were also used in regression analysis to find out their controlling effect on the academic career development of the respondents.

Table 3: Respondent's characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Mean $\pm$ SD
Age			33.29 $\pm$ 6.31
≤ 30	91	37.60	
31-40	113	46.69	
>40	38	15.70	
Gender			
Female	78	32.23	
Male	164	67.77	
Institution			
Mzumbe University	112	46.28	
SUA	82	33.88	

UDSM	48	19.83	
Position			
Assistant Lecturer	129	53.31	
Tutorial Assistant	97	40.08	
Other	16	6.61	
Experience categories			3.96±3.07
1-2	92	38.02	
3-5	101	41.74	
>5	49	20.25	

Status of Mentorship

Table 3 shows the response of young academics on whether they have mentors or not. This was a very important question before responding to role modelling statements. Since the study wanted to test mentorship practices (role modelling) and career academic development, it was assumed that, if respondents had no mentors, the rest of the questions (statements) on role modelling practice might be irrelevant to him/her. Therefore, those who agreed were directed to proceed with other questions, and those who said no were directed to submit the response. Of the 242 respondents, 226 (93.39%) agreed they have a mentor, while 16 (6.61%) disagreed (see Table 3). These findings imply the presence of mentorship in the selected higher learning institutions. Therefore, the remaining questions were only answered by those who agreed (226) and were used for further analysis.

Table 4: Do You Have a Mentor?

Do you have a mentor within your institution	Frequency (n=226)	Percentage (%)
No	16	6.61
Yes	226	93.39

Role Modelling in HLIs

Table 4 presents respondents' assessments of the formulated statements on how mentorship practice (role modelling) has an impact on their academic career development. Statements were derived from the wider literature review that was conducted. Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of role modelling practice from their mentors (role models) using a five-point Likert scale from 1-strongly disagree (SD), 2-disagree (D), 3-neutral (N), 4-agree (A), and 5-strongly agree (SA). For many assessments, there were relatively homogeneous degrees of agreement across all statements, implying that role modelling is integrated in the academic career development of young academic staff, with mean scores ranging from 4.11 to 4.33 on a scale of 5. Notably high agreements were reported in statements such as 'My mentor's professional achievements motivate me to improve my own performance' (4.33±0.70), followed by 'My mentor actively encourages me to pursue new growth opportunities' (4.25±0.73). This suggests that mentees perceive their mentors as credible role models whose behavior, values, and achievements provide inspiration and practical directions for academic success.

Table 5: Role Modelling in HLIs

Statements	SD	D	N	AG	SA	Mean ±SD
My mentor serves as a role model for professional behaviour in academia	1(0.44)	2(0.88)	40(17.70)	103(45.5)	80(35.40)	4.15±0.77
My mentor provides valuable guidance on navigating my academic career	2(0.88)	1(0.44)	27(11.95)	119(52.6)	77(34.07)	4.19±0.72
My mentor helped redefine what a junior employee should be professionally	2(0.88)	3(1.33)	33(14.67)	108(48.0)	79(35.11)	4.15±0.78
I emulate the professional values and attitude of my mentor	2(0.88)	2(0.88)	34(15.04)	119(52.6)	69(30.53)	4.11±0.75
I look up to my mentor for inspiration in achieving academic success	0(0.00)	6(2.65)	28(12.39)	103(45.5)	89(39.38)	4.22±0.76
My mentor's professional achievements motivate me to improve my own performance	1(0.44)	3(1.33)	16(7.08)	107(47.3)	99(43.81)	4.33±0.70
The mentorship I receive has helped me build confidence in teaching and research	0(0.00)	5(2.21)	27(11.95)	114(50.4)	80(35.40)	4.19±0.73
My mentor actively encourages me to pursue new opportunities for growth	1(0.44)	2(0.88)	27(11.95)	106(46.9)	90(39.82)	4.25±0.73
I can relate to and aspire to achieve similar accomplishments as my mentor	1(0.44)	2(0.88)	32(14.16)	122(53.9)	69(30.53)	4.13±0.71
My mentor shares personal experiences that help me understand academic challenges	2(0.88)	8(3.54)	29(12.83)	106(46.9)	81(35.84)	4.13±0.83
I believe having a mentor has positively influenced my professional conduct	0(0.00)	5(2.21)	26(11.50)	104(46.0)	91(40.27)	4.24±0.74
The mentorship I receive aligns well with my long-term career goals	0(0.00)	5(2.21)	33(14.60)	109(48.2)	79(34.96)	4.16±0.75

Inferential Statistics

Table 6: Linear Regression Model for the influence of Role modeling on Academic Career Development

Label	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	t Value	P-value	VIF
Intercept	1.11741	0.3532	3.16	0.0018	0
Role modelling in HLIs	0.53372	0.06781	7.87	<.0001	1.00713
Age	0.01082	0.00671	1.61	0.1082	1.22894
Years of experience	0.02771	0.01512	1.83	0.0683	1.22484
Gender =Male	0.23673	0.08528	2.78	0.006	1.0616
Note: R ² =0.497					

*Statistically significant (P < 0.05)

In Table 6, four independent variables were included in the regression model. These factors explain 49.7% of the variations in academic career development of the young academic staff in the selected HLIs, which means 51.3% is contributed by other variables that were not considered in the study. It was observed that academic career development was significantly associated with role modelling and gender, meaning that a unit increase in the role modelling score was associated with an increase in academic career development score by 0.53 units ($\beta=0.53372$, $p<.0001$). Regarding gender, it was noted that male respondents had more career development by 0.236 as compared to females ($\beta=0.23673$, $p=0.006$). Other factors, like age and years of experience, were not significantly associated with career development.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the hypothesis (H1) that role modelling has a significant influence on protégés' academic career development in Tanzanian Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs). The results underscore the centrality of role models in shaping the cognitive, behavioural, and attitudinal dimensions of junior academics' professional growth. In line with Vygotsky's (1978) Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasises learning through observation, imitation, and social interaction, mentors in HLIs function as "more knowledgeable others" who guide junior staff in navigating complex academic trajectories. This alignment suggests that mentorship through role modelling serves as a critical scaffold for protégés, enabling them to develop competencies required for career advancement in teaching, research, consultancy, and community engagement.

The findings are consistent with previous studies (Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021; Kearney et al., 2020; Jack et al., 2017; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020), which demonstrate that protégés not only acquire technical expertise from mentors but also internalise their values, professional ethics, and resilience strategies. Role models provide clarity and direction, helping junior academics build confidence, emulate successful behaviours, and define pathways to achieve academic excellence. Similarly, Cruess et al. (2008) argue that mentors' attitudes and professional integrity create a blueprint for mentees' career success.

Nonetheless, these results diverge from Mnasi et al. (2022), who reported that role modelling had little effect on employee performance in Tanzanian Local Government Authorities. This contrast may reflect contextual differences between public administration and higher education, or it may underscore the importance of selecting appropriate mentors whose expertise and career trajectories align with the aspirations of protégés (Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021). For example, junior academics seeking to publish in

reputable journals may benefit most from mentors with established publishing records, thereby learning by observing and replicating proven strategies.

The study further revealed gender disparities, with male protégés experiencing greater career development than their female counterparts. This aligns with earlier literature (Girona, 2002; Picaviello, 2016; Kearney et al., 2020), which links female underrepresentation in mentorship networks to limited access to relatable role models. In Tanzanian HLIs, where male staff significantly outnumber females (TCU, 2024; TCU, 2025), male protégés are more likely to encounter mentors with similar professional backgrounds, enhancing the relatability and effectiveness of role modelling. Conversely, female protégés continue to face structural and cultural barriers, including traditional gender roles and stereotypes (Tarimo & Swai, 2020; Hakro & Mathew, 2020), which constrain mentorship opportunities and hinder career progression.

Policy frameworks, including the Tanzania Education and Training Policy (2014), the Scheme of Service (2022), and TCU guidelines (2019), acknowledge staff development but do not explicitly address mentorship or gender-sensitive role modelling. This policy gap may explain the uneven practice of mentorship in HLIs and its limited impact on female career progression. Addressing these gaps through explicit institutionalisation of mentorship policies, with a focus on gender equity, could enhance the capacity of HLIs to produce a balanced and sustainable cadre of future academic leaders.

Conclusion

This study provides robust evidence that role modelling exerts a significant and positive influence on the academic career development of protégés in Tanzanian Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs). Protégés who observe and emulate the professional conduct, scholarly achievements, and ethical standards of their mentors acquire critical skills, build confidence, and gain motivation to advance in their academic careers. Accordingly, the study concludes that fostering effective role modelling among academic staff is essential for cultivating excellence and preparing the next generation of scholars.

However, since role modelling largely depends on the learner's selection of mentors, there is a potential risk of aligning with unsuitable mentors. Therefore, the effectiveness of role modelling is contingent upon selecting mentors who are not only competent and experienced but also willing to provide guidance, coaching, and practical insights to support the mentee's career progression.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study identifies persistent institutional gaps in addressing mentorship practices and gender equity, which limit the full potential of role modelling. These gaps hinder HLIs from fully realizing their mandate of producing competent scholars capable of contributing to national development. Consequently, there is an urgent need for policy frameworks and institutional strategies that strengthen structured mentorship, integrate gender-responsive practices, and ensure systematic support for junior academic staff. Such interventions are critical to sustaining the quality of teaching, research, and innovation in Tanzanian HLIs.

Recommendations

First, Junior academic staff should carefully select mentors who are not only technically competent but also accessible, supportive, and aligned with the mentee's career aspirations, learning needs, and personal values. Mentorship effectiveness depends on the compatibility and commitment of both mentor and protégé.

Second, institutions should promote formalised mentorship programs that actively address gender disparities. Incorporating female role models and creating gender-specific mentorship pathways can enhance career development opportunities for women, thereby balancing the current male-dominated progression patterns in Tanzanian HLIs.

Suggestions for Further Studies

First, given the significant effect of gender found in the study, future studies may also conduct a comparative gender analysis to investigate gender-specific barriers and enablers of academic career development in greater detail, possibly comparing male and female mentorship pathways.

Second, this study only tested role modelling as one dimension of role modelling; thus, future studies could evaluate the influence and effectiveness of different mentorship models like sponsorship, acceptance, and coaching, a mentor-mentee close relationship, and assignment exposures across diverse institutional settings.

Third, in-depth qualitative exploration, conducting qualitative/ mixed method research, would offer richer insights into the lived experiences of mentees, the nature of mentor engagements, and gendered dynamics within mentorship in HLIs.

Authors Contributions

Shauri Kinunda: Conceptualisation, Analysis, investigation, Methodology, writing original draft

Denis Kamugish: Conceptualisation, Methodology, supervision, writing, review, and editing

Zuena Kilugwe: Conceptualisation, Methodology, supervision, writing, review, and editing

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