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Mentorship in open distance e-learning: Enhancing mentees' academic development, career trajectories, and progress toward SDG 4

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***Abstract*—** New academics in higher education worldwide report high levels of stress from various sources. Adaptation and support through mentoring are needed if new academics engaged in teaching, research, and academic citizenship are to endure, learn, and contribute to student learning and advance in their academic careers. The need for support and development in academia through mentoring cannot be overstated, as it directly impacts advancing SDG#4. This has led to unravelling mentoring in academia as a vehicle for advancing SDG#4 in an Open Distance e-learning (ODeL) context. The effective mentorship programme in ODeL ensures that mentees are equipped with the academic skills to flourish in academia. The study explores mentees' mentorship experiences in an ODeL context to enhance their academic development, career trajectories, and SDG #4. This study employed a qualitative case study research design. Significantly, the study used the population. Fifteen new junior academics were purposively selected as mentees in an ODeL institution. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The findings revealed that dedicating time to mentor-mentee meetings contributes to collegiality, enhancing mentees' career advancement, job performance, and self-confidence, and fostering a sense of community and fulfillment in ODeL. To improve mentorship programmes in ODeL, it is recommended that mentors regularly meet with their mentees, that evidence of mentoring activities be submitted to department chairs every quarter, and that mentors introduce their mentees to their local and international networks to support their professional growth. This study contributes by addressing a gap in the literature, informing mentoring policies in the ODeL context, offering practical insights, and providing effective mentorship strategies to support mentees' academic development and career trajectories.

Keywords: Mentoring; SDG#4, Open distance e-learning, Inspirational leadership

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I. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, the role of higher education as a critical driver of socio-economic redress and transformation has been widely acknowledged (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2011). Institutions of higher learning across the globe implement mentorship programmes to build staff capacity, particularly among early career scholars or mentees (Padayachee et al., 2024; Schriever & Grainger, 2019). Quality Education is the fourth of the critical Sustainable Development Goals (Mkhize, 2025). This goal favours mentoring as it appraises equitable, inclusive education that encourages academic career development (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2016). The recognition of the importance of mentorship in higher education is evident in the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework and the programmes initiated to support early-career academics (Dhunpath, 2018). The importance of mentorship programmes in higher education, particularly in Open Distance e-learning (ODeL), cannot be underestimated, as they can increase mentees' confidence (Schulze, 2010). Kilag et al. (2024) state that educational advances worldwide are closely tied to the practices of academic leaders. However, we argue that the literature on leadership characteristics in formal mentoring within an ODeL context is limited.

Holmes (2020) from the United Kingdom suggests that, while the higher education (HE) sector has experienced increases in career development and continuous professional development, mentoring has not been prioritised. Another study conducted in Canada revealed that the weak mentorship culture and a lack of institutional resources and support constrain effective mentoring (Sheridan et al., 2015). Irby et al. (2023) studied virtual mentoring and coaching through virtual professional leadership learning communities. Mgaiwa and Kapinga (2021) show that, in Tanzania, mentorship programmes at higher education institutions are not limited to young emerging scholars. In South Africa, Tshishonga and Matse (2023) explored academic mentoring among undergraduate university students. While the scholarly studies cited above have contributed to theories and practices of mentoring, there is a paucity of research on mentees' experiences of mentorship in an ODeL context.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring is the pinnacle of success in an academic trajectory

In the mentoring literature reviewed, multiple definitions of mentoring exist, and these definitions are constantly evolving. We found that competing definitions of mentoring have been advanced, and scholars have yet to agree on one universal definition (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021; Cain et al., 2024). However, there is consensus that mentoring "is relational and developmental," has career (instrumental) and psychosocial (relational) functions, and "includes phases and transitions," as identified by Kram (1983, p. 11) and Pennanen (2023). According to Oikarainen et al. (2022), mentoring helps employees to be

independent. In mentoring, a mentee must experience learning stages from a mentor and then practice them until they are mastered. Dlamini et al (2024) argue that mentorship demands critical strategies for success. We argue in this article that, to achieve the above, the mentor requires a special kind of leadership to develop the mentee effectively. Mentors in higher education are considered outstanding scholars who are more satisfied with their careers and have a supportive attitude that advances learning and career advancement (Johnson, 2015). Collie and Perry (2019) posit that effective mentoring ensures the retention of mentees in academia and facilitates their professional growth, advancing their development from novices to competent professionals.

Furthermore, Johnson (2015) defines a mentee as a dedicated professional ready to learn from a well-experienced scholar in higher education. For the present study, a mentee is an emerging scholar with a doctoral degree who has not supervised more than five master's students to completion or an emerging scholar with a master's degree.

Savage et al. (2010, p. 21) define mentoring as "a process in which one person, usually of superior rank and outstanding achievement, guides the development of an entry-level individual". Senior academics foster a smooth generational transition by passing knowledge and skills to younger academics through mentorship programmes. Structured mentorship programmes have succeeded (Girves et al., 2005; Packer-Williams & Evans, 2011). While at first mentoring takes the form of a seasoned academic guiding a novice, it develops into an exchange of ideas and knowledge. Higher education institutions have mentoring programmes to ensure that mentees receive the guidance and support they need to adapt smoothly to the institution. Mentoring programmes include peer, group, e-mentoring, collaborative, multiple-level, and reverse mentoring (Griffiths et al., 2018; Pololi & Evans, 2015). Regardless of their form, they all contribute to mentees' professional development and career aspirations (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Mentors have traversed the journey; they know what lies ahead and how best to navigate it; therefore, they must share their experiences with early-career academics for the institution's success (Sambunjak et al., 2006). Therefore, the relationship between mentors and mentees must be healthy. Merga and Mason (2021) argue that an effective way of enhancing the mentor-mentee relationship in higher education is to ensure that mentors co-author research outputs with their mentees. The dynamics contributing to tensions in mentor-mentee relationships are age, gender, ethnicity, and so forth (Bailey et al., 2016).

Mentorship requires specific strategies and approaches to be productive. There are different approaches that institutions, mentors, and mentees may take to advance good mentorship in their practice (Aldossary et al., 2025). A significant challenge in higher education teaching is 'publish or perish'. Quinn and Vorster (2012) attribute such teachings to the neoliberal forces in higher education. Senior academics may be too focused on scholarly writing and less on nurturing early-career academics. Therefore, early-career academics may struggle to find mentors; for those who do, the mentoring may not be practical (Nadkarni & Helenius, 2024).

Providing mentorship and guidance to early-career academics until they gain confidence is fundamental if higher education institutions are to attract and retain emerging academics (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015). The authors of the present study argue that this tendency in ODeL can be mitigated only if senior academics with experience on the online portal can equip inexperienced academics with the necessary skills to address such challenges. A study conducted in Sri Lanka indicates that reskilling the workforce, including academics, is urgent; therefore, mentors in higher education can enable mentees to implement their action plans with self-discipline and develop new academic skills (Gamage et al., 2021). Wild et al. (2017) maintain that open-distance learning mentors can help mentees quickly understand the organisational culture and system.

In the digital age, mentorship significantly affects teaching and learning in higher education. A study conducted in South Africa indicates that mentors reflect on their practice to support mentees' professional career growth (Gordon, 2019). Moreover, effective mentorship in higher education must help mentees become more competitive academically and gain insight into their surroundings (Hakro & Mathew, 2020). According to Ibukunolu (2017), the mentor-mentee relationship in higher education positively impacts mentee research productivity. As a result of this relationship, the mentee's chances of attending local and international conferences increase, and the mentee begins to publish research in reputable international journals. A study by Brannagan and Oriol (2014) argues that effective mentorship in higher education should ensure that mentors and mentees are paired based on their educational backgrounds and course assignments. Furthermore, before the mentee uses online methods to deliver the lesson, the mentor should introduce the mentee to all systems and materials relevant to online teaching.

Despite the positive impact of mentorship programmes in higher education, a study by Goerisch et al. (2019) shows that they remain rooted in patriarchal power structures. In addition, it overlooks experts who have historically been underrepresented in favour of seniors who have never experienced historical exclusion from tenure. The mentor-mentee relationship in higher education often leads to different perspectives on how a mentor's role should be enacted, contributing to the ineffectiveness of mentorship programmes (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Mgaiwa and Kapinga (2021) show that in Tanzania, mentorship programmes in higher education are not specific to young emerging scholars but to all academics; however, university management does not monitor these programmes.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 4

The SDGs contain 17 universal goals (see Figure 1) agreed upon by countries worldwide to create a better, more sustainable life (Tavares et al., 2026). The SDGs are a cornerstone of government programmes worldwide (Chan et al., 2026). Therefore, we argue that in an era of global transformation and in the pursuit of inclusive, high-quality education, mentoring in academia plays a critical role in advancing SDG4 (Ntsiful et al., 2026).

Figure 1: United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015)

What is the focus of SDG 4? It focuses specifically on inclusive, equitable, quality, and lifelong education. Although prioritised among the 17 Goals, SDG 4 underpins all the other Goals, as it is a critical imperative for their achievement. This Goal is, of course, actionable in formal and non-formal education at all levels; however, HEIs have a particular role to play in its implementation and realisation. Heleta et al. (2025) posit that higher education is the foundation for the SDGs to flourish, hence the importance of effective mentoring. Leal Filho et al. (2019a) add that education is foundational to the SDGs and that HEIs play a very relevant role in their implementation. Therefore, mentoring in HEIs should mentor academics to face new challenges in a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) World (Pepito Jr., 2026).

Given the critical importance of higher education, this article focuses on the role of ODeL institutions in advancing SDG 4 through mentoring.

Target 4.3 specifically refers to equality of access to technical, vocational, and tertiary-level education, including university education, amongst men and women. Target 4.7 addresses the need to "ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" (UN, 2015). HEI should ensure that mentoring offered to academics mobilises commitment to teaching and learning, research, academic citizenship, and community development (Balint et al., 2026; da Veiga et al., 2026)

Unpacking the ODeL context

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Africa, including South Africa, have adopted e-learning in response to pressure to expand access to higher education for previously ineligible learners (Ennam, 2024). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) adopted "open learning as a strategy to increase access to education and training opportunities for all and to construct quality learning environments which account for learners' context and use the most appropriate and cost-effective methods and technologies" as stipulated in the Draft Policy Framework for the Provision of Open Learning and Distance Education and Training (DHET, 2017, p. 1).

The University of South Africa (Unisa) officially implemented the e-learning mode of delivery (ODeL) in 2013 (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015). Over the years, Unisa has offered blended and fully online learning modules. Unisa has undergone various stages of distance education (Twinomurinzi et al., 2025). Bates (2005) states that e-learning "encompasses any form of telecommunications and computer-based learning" (p.8). Singh et al. (2025) define ODeL as an educational system that enables students to learn wherever they are and at their own pace. We argue in this article that ODeL can be very challenging for academics compared to the correspondence or face-to-face model at an institution of higher learning. Moubayed et al. (2018) explain that the value of learning in ODeL at HEIs lies in its ability to teach, operate, and maintain e-learning programmes at any time and anywhere.

We argue in this article that emerging scholars entering ODeL may meet the academic requirements for teaching in ODeL yet lack the necessary online capabilities. We concur with Singh (2022) when she states that:

Just as a flower cannot blossom without sunshine, so too academics at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) cannot be successful in the sudden transition from face-to-face lectures to online learning; thus, the importance of re-skilling and mentoring.

The study suggests that, in the digital age, particularly in an ODeL context, an effective mentorship programme can enhance a mentee's professional growth. However, a study in Uganda found that mentorship is not yet institutionalised due to the limited time allocated to it. Subsequently, mentorship is implemented on an ad hoc basis (Nakanjako et al., 2011). The limited research on mentees' experiences in developing countries, including South Africa, may have serious implications for the success of any intervention aimed at developing early-emerging scholars in the ODeL context (Mfopa et al., 2025). However, Dumulescu and Muțiu (2021) caution that the online environment requires agile systems and structures to support digitalised teaching and learning.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Background to the theory

This study adopted inspirational leadership as a theoretical framework to gain insights into mentees' voices and experiences in an ODeL context. One leadership style that can be recognised is inspirational leadership, which refers to creating an environment in which followers feel comfortable performing tasks willingly and learning from their leaders to achieve success (Whitehead, 2002). What does it mean to be an inspirational leader? Inspirational leaders provide a vision and inspire followers to greater goals, anchored with mutual respect (Topaktaş & Işık, 2025). These authors further maintain that inspirational leaders (ILs) can discern what followers need and what they find challenging. Inspired leaders inspire, personalise and stimulate intellect (Rabiul & Yean, 2021). Robiah et al. (2024) agree that leadership is essential in creating an inclusive and sustainable educational institution. Accordingly, its role becomes essential to ensure the development of inclusive higher education for inspirational leaders. Uy et al. (2024) add that critical leadership qualities are closely tied to the ability to inspire and motivate followers.

Relevance to the study

Bonau (2017) explains that inspirational leadership contains self-awareness and sincerity as key pillars for motivating others. Studies have shown that inspirational leadership is associated with happiness at work (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Furthermore, Salas-Vallina et al. (2020) note that inspirational leadership can influence organisational learning capability through experimentation, proactivity, interaction with the environment, dialogue, and participative decision-making. Queiri et al. (2025) assert that inspiring leadership and innovative work behaviour are not merely desirable traits but essential components of global success. This study argues that a supportive, authentic IL style will likely help mentees meet their academic challenges (Tang & Eng, 2023). Mahmoud and Raheem (2025) highlight the need for inspiring leadership to improve succession planning. Inspirational. We adopt Bass's (2008) five indicators of inspirational leadership, namely intellectual stimulation, envisioning, managing impressions, moulding followers' expectations, and managing meaning, as the dimensions of inspirational leadership. In any organisation, aside from strong leadership, inspirational leadership plays a critical role in shaping employee performance, mentoring, and career growth (Nafisah & Mansyur, 2026). Widodo et al. (2025) add that mentors with an inspirational leadership style inspire through powerful visions, provide individual attention to mentees, and encourage innovation and creative thinking.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study explores mentees' mentorship experiences in an ODeL context to enhance their academic development, career trajectories, and progress toward SDG#4.

V. METHODS

Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach is suitable for this study because it involves collecting data from people who experience the phenomenon and have perceptions and insights into related factors and requirements (Lim, 2024). It is also an approach that studies phenomena in their natural context, understands them in depth, and interprets them in terms of the meanings, information, and data described by others (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Research design

A research design is the framework used for the planning, implementation, and analysis of a study. To analyse the research question, a qualitative case study design was used to investigate the experiences of a sample of mentees within the bounded context of one ODeL institution. Case study design is adopted in this study because it involves an in-depth analysis of an event, programme, process, activity, or common experience among participants (Poedjiastutie, 2026). Specific timeframe and activity control case studies involve exploring past and present experiences; hence, they are utilised in this study.

Participants

This study employed a purposive sampling approach, focusing on 15 mentees affiliated with an ODeL university (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The selection criteria ensured that participants had practical mentor-mentee experience, enabling them to articulate clear, future-oriented

perceptions and visions regarding their current and prospective needs, thereby fostering a positive mentoring experience for new academics' career trajectories. This sampling strategy facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data, offering a comprehensive understanding of mentees' experiences and viewpoints (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This approach aligns with qualitative research paradigms (Sithole, 2025).

Research site

Participants and the research site in this study were selected because they were presumed to be particularly knowledgeable about the issues under investigation and to be affected by the problem. In this study, all participants had experience working within an ODeL academic context in a mentee-mentor relationship.

Data collection techniques

Online questionnaires were used to collect the required data from mentees. The researchers formulated research questions and developed an online questionnaire with a link. This link was distributed to mentees via email, allowing them to respond at their convenience by clicking a button. Participants were given sufficient time to reflect and provide responses. Online questionnaires guarantee a relatively short time frame for collecting responses and are time and cost-saving.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis was used to identify, analyse and report the existing patterns (themes) within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). To ensure the required rigor, reflective journaling and member checking were used to prevent personal interpretations and biases from influencing the findings from interactions with mentees in the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reflective journaling in this study was used to document the researcher's thoughts, emotions, and biases. The member checking technique was used to improve the study's credibility, validity, and trustworthiness by returning data, analyses, or interpretations to participants for review.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were upheld (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The institution's ethical clearance committee at the College of Education granted permission to conduct the study. The researchers obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of South Africa (Reference no. 90060059MC 2024/06/07). Confidentiality was maintained to protect participants' privacy; no personal details were disclosed to anyone. Informed consent emphasised voluntarism, ensuring that participants understood they were participating in their own free will, without coercion, and that they had the option to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants to publish this paper.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed under four broad themes that emerged during the inductive and deductive data analysis. In other words, the themes draw on the theories, literature, predetermined research questions, and the issues emerging from the field. These are mentoring support as a catalyst for mentee academic growth, poor communication, absence of regular consultation, and qualities for mentee success in academia.

Mentoring support as a catalyst for mentee growth

The study revealed that a healthy and supportive relationship between mentor and mentee is critical for successful academic outcomes. The components of support identified by the participants include *creating a collegial environment for mentees, providing co-supervision opportunities, and constructive feedback*.

Creating a collegial environment

Collegial relationships are among the most prevalent interpersonal relationships in life, particularly between mentees and mentors, and participants found them critical for effective mentoring. These included cooperation and collaboration in a collegial spirit of teamwork. For example, participant B said:

"The support I am receiving from my mentor is enormous. Since I joined Unisa, my mentor has been taking me through various activities. Firstly, regarding teaching and learning, she taught me about the LMS used at Unisa and research and innovation.

Participant D emphasised the importance of creating collegiality in a mentoring context:

"My mentor encourages me to attend conferences and write articles. She also takes time to review my article draft. She also encourages me to actively engage in community engagements and be an active academic citizen by joining organisations for academics both locally and internationally".

Participant A added:

My mentor is always available and supportive. He provides me with support and advice on supervision and is also present during supervision meetings with my M and D students.

The study found that participants saw committing dedicated time to mentor-mentee meetings as contributing to collegiality. For example, participant E said:

She also takes time to review my article draft. My mentor is always available and supportive.

According to Rustiawan et al. (2023), mentoring is an activity in the form of support and guidance to individuals or groups, aimed at developing the competence and character of the person (mentee) in a positive direction. Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) argue that there is a need to see:

Collegial relationships are critical to the growth of self-belief and self-resourcefulness in becoming and being academics … how, through collective participation, novice and experienced academics can become valuable sources of learning and support for each other (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016, p. 224).

Therefore, inspirational leaders possess charismatic abilities to inspire followers and attract desirable employees at the top of their operational capabilities in academia (Toseef et al., 2022).

Co-supervision and constructive feedback

Participants in this study identified co-supervision and constructive feedback as critical support that may contribute to mentees' academic success. Participant H said:

He is also co-supervising two PhD students with me, patiently teaching me the tricks of supervision, which has boosted my confidence in supervision.

Participant J emphasised the importance of co-supervision in mentorship and stated that:

My mentor provides support and advice on supervision and is also present during supervision meetings with my M and D students. He always gives me constructive feedback that includes both criticism and praise. He provides me with support and advice on supervision and is also present during supervision meetings with my M and D students.

Rabiul and Yean (2021) explain that inspired leaders inspire, personalise and stimulate intellect. We concur with the above authors and maintain that co-supervision is another strategy mentors may utilise to stimulate mentees' intellect in an ODeL context. In this study, we advocate inspirational leadership rather than transformational leadership. Whitehead (2002) distinguished inspirational leadership from transformational leadership, noting that the former focuses on creating an environment where followers feel comfortable performing tasks within a trusting climate. However, they should learn from them rather than aim to change employee behaviour, as transformational leadership does. Co-supervision between mentor and mentee creates a conducive environment for mentees' career trajectory in HE.

Poor communication

Poor communication was an obstacle to effective mentoring in this study. Participants responded to a research question asking, "What are the obstacles that hinder effective mentoring in ODeL?" Participant B said:

"Since we are now working remotely, you can ask the mentor for assistance at any time. Before calling the mentor, I must check her availability on Teams. It aligns with the contact university, where you quickly go to one's office to talk, both formally and informally. In most cases, team conversations limit you to formal interactions".

Participant G explained that the lack of communication poses an

obstacle and said:

"There is no communication between the mentee and mentor".

Participant H said:

"A lack of communication; failure to set realistic goals and timelines; lack of time; Academic jealousy; lack of resources; Mismatched expectations".

Participant B identified other obstacles to effective mentoring and said:

"Dishonesty, lack of communication, and lack of inclusivity".

Participant E explained that working from home in an ODeL context during and after COVID-19 has added to the lack of communication between mentor and mentee and stated:

"We work from home without physically interacting with colleagues, including my mentor".

Ishaqi et al. (2021) assert that inspirational leadership in a mentoring relationship should inspire and influence the organisation's members to develop their potential and motivation, ensuring personal and organisational success. However, we argue in this study that this cannot be achieved without open and effective communication between mentor and mentee. Deng and Turner (2023) and Okoliko and Hastings (2026) identify communication as a mentor characteristic associated with superior mentoring outcomes.

Absence of regular consultation

This study found that the absence of regular consultation was a challenge in a mentoring relationship. Participants were asked to reflect *on their experience as mentees and highlight the challenges they encountered in their mentoring relationships*.

Participant I said:

I have encountered a few challenges. For instance, you find that your mentor is unfamiliar with your research field because her research field is different from yours. As much as she provides feedback on your writing, I sometimes notice deficiencies stemming from differences between our research fields. You are not involved in the process, and you will be asked to complete the mentee and mentor forms to confirm the mentee-mentor relationship.

There is no mentoring relationship.

Participant J added that the absence of regular consultation is a challenge in mentoring and said:

Not being involved in the plan, lack of communication, and dishonesty. I have never met my mentor in person.

Participant B shared similar sentiments and said:

My mentor is busy, and finding her even on her phone is hard. She has many commitments, mainly due to mentoring me.

According to Dai et al. (2020), a leader's zeal, transparency, desire, and creativity may invigorate and inspire subordinates. Patterson (2024) and Manuel and Poorsattar (2021) postulate that effective mentorship is crucial for achieving mentees' professional success and enhances their career advancement, job performance, self-confidence, and the development of their sense of community and fulfilment. This study maintains that the above can only be achieved if the mentor and mentee engage in regular consultations and meetings.

Qualities for mentees' success in academia

The findings of this study revealed that mentee qualities are essential for creating a conducive mentoring relationship. Participants responded to a research question: *Which qualities should mentees have to enable a good mentoring relationship?* Participant K identified good listening skills, independent thinking, decision-making, commitment, and a desire to know as critical qualities for mentees in a mentoring relationship and said:

"The mentee should be a good listener, an independent thinker, a decision maker, and a committed individual, with a desire to know".

Participant F said:

"An active good listener provides honest feedback; knowledgeable, kind, respectful, and passionate about helping others. Honesty, inclusion, and effective communication are essential".

Sam et al. (2025) explain that Inspirational leadership encapsulates Inspiration, Visionary Thinking, Effective Communication, and Trustworthiness. Bass and Bass (2008) suggested five indicators: intellectual stimulation, envisioning, managing impression, moulding followers' expectations, and managing meaning as the dimensions of inspirational leadership. This study suggests that the dimensions of inspirational leadership are critical for cultivating positive qualities in mentees who can advance their career trajectories in the ODeL context.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study responded to the research question formulated to guide this study: *"What are the mentees' experiences of mentorship in an ODeL context in advancing their academic development and SDG #4"?* The findings revealed four broad themes: *mentoring support as a catalyst for mentee academic growth, poor communication, absence of regular consultation, and qualities for mentee success in academia.* Leadership education in HE is an essential strategy for developing a generation of qualified mentors. Achieving this goal requires a comprehensive programme integrated into mentor development programmes. The present study contributes to the body of new knowledge by proposing a mentor-mentee policy in the ODeL context that ensures that department chairs pair mentor-mentees based on their educational backgrounds and areas of specialisation. It should be included in the mentors' key performance indicators at least once a year, to publish a paper in a higher-impact journal with their mentees. In addition, mentors should regularly meet with their mentees, submit evidence to department chairs, and introduce their mentees to their local and international networks to support their professional growth. Zielińska et al. (2025) argue that leadership characterised by supportive guidance, employee recognition, communication, empathy, clear organisational goals, and management skills is key to effective mentoring and mentee growth. Sutrisno et al. (2023) caution that in this increasingly complex era, building a generation of qualified leaders in mentorship within an ODeL context is critical. Thus, leadership strategies in a mentoring relationship must be continuously updated and adapted to current conditions to cultivate leaders who can overcome future challenges and develop new academics. The study recommends formalised, ongoing mentoring in universities to enable young academics to experience career mobility. We recommend that academics embrace digital technologies in mentoring and strive to become 'digital natives' rather than 'digital immigrants' (Makoe, 2012; Mwansa et al., 2026). Finally, we posit that effective mentoring offers new academics (mentees) an opportunity to contribute to knowledge creation and the Africanisation of universities in Africa (Hungwe & Mkhize, 2022). This research was a qualitative study conducted in an ODeL context; thus, the findings cannot be extended to other HEI contexts. However, the researchers' intention was not to generalise their findings, but rather to generate a discourse on mentoring as the panacea for advancing Sustainable Development Goal #4 and career trajectories in an ODeL context. The authors recommend further research on mentoring to advance sustainable development goals and career development in other HEI contexts.

VIII. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

TRM conceptualised the article and worked on the methodology with TAC. Data collection was conducted by LM and ND, with the investigation executed by TRM and TAC. Writing—TRM conducted original draft preparation. All authors conducted writing, review, editing, and project administration.

IX. FUNDING

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X. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full

responsibility for the content of this publication.

XII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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