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Opinion

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Making Guided Learning Work in Undergraduate Mentoring at a Regional Chinese University

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Abstract

Assigning academic mentors to undergraduates establishes access to individual guidance, but does not specify how that guidance becomes a learning process. This opinion article develops an operational framework for undergraduate mentoring, drawing on reflective accounts of practice at Shihezi University, China, and selected scholarship on self-regulated learning and feedback. Guided learning is defined as a recurring process in which students identify a learning problem, negotiate an achievable goal with a mentor, complete a task, interpret feedback, and revise their work or plan. The framework connects these activities through a small set of learning records, while differentiating tasks by student readiness and stage of study. It also specifies how matching, reassignment, workload recognition, and departmental oversight can support implementation. The central proposition is that mentoring should be evaluated through evidence of students' decisions and revisions as well as access to guidance. The framework is a design proposal, not an evaluation of intervention effectiveness. Its feasibility and educational effects require prospective investigation. It offers a practical basis for organizing individual guidance in universities where staff time and research opportunities are unevenly distributed.

Keywords: Undergraduate mentoring; Guided learning; Self-regulated learning; Formative feedback; Regional universities; Higher education

Abbreviations

None.

Introduction

Undergraduate mentoring creates an opportunity to connect disciplinary study with individual academic development. Yet appointing a mentor leaves important questions unresolved: who identifies the learning problem, what the student should do between meetings, and how either party knows whether guidance has been useful. A critical review of college student mentoring highlights the importance of defining mentoring and clarifying its theoretical basis [1]. These concerns are relevant when institutions extend mentoring across an entire undergraduate program.

This article argues that the basic unit of mentoring should be a learning task with an observable sequence of decisions and revisions. More meetings may improve access, but meeting frequency alone cannot show whether a student has learned to plan, evaluate evidence, or respond to difficulty. A practical mechanism must therefore connect access to a mentor with the work students undertake after receiving advice.

The discussion is situated at Shihezi University in Xinjiang, China. Practice accounts informing the proposal describe group

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discussions, literature reading, research and competition activities, thesis guidance, career advice, and support between undergraduate and postgraduate students. These accounts provide examples of settings in which mentoring takes place. They do not constitute a systematically sampled dataset or establish how common particular difficulties are across the university. The purpose is to articulate a mechanism suitable for subsequent implementation and evaluation, rather than to estimate the effects of the existing system.

Discussion

What guided learning adds to a mentoring arrangement

Guided learning here refers to an agreed process in which the student retains responsibility for doing and explaining the work, while the mentor helps to clarify goals, select methods, locate resources, and assess progress. It is a mode of undergraduate academic mentoring, rather than a claim to reproduce the tutorial teaching model of another national system. Mentoring can include personal and career concerns, but academic mentors should coordinate with qualified services when a concern exceeds their role.

Self-regulated learning provides a useful theoretical reference for this process. Panadero's review describes models that address how learners organize and regulate their learning [2]. The implication for the present design is to make planning and reflection visible within mentoring tasks. This connection is a theoretical rationale; it does not establish that the proposed mechanism improves self-regulation.

Feedback research offers a second reference point. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick relate formative assessment to students' capacity to regulate their learning [3]. Carless and Boud emphasize the capacities needed to interpret and use feedback [4]. Together, these perspectives suggest that a mentor's comments should be followed by an opportunity for students to decide what to change and explain their response. A record of comments alone would capture only part of that process.

Negotiate one attainable goal and make responsibility explicit

A mentoring cycle begins with a short student account of a specific difficulty, the work already attempted, and the support sought. Mentor and student then agree on one main goal, the evidence needed to judge progress, a feasible deadline, and a review point. A manageable goal might be to explain why several sources reach different conclusions, revise an interview schedule, or compare two approaches to a professional problem. These are illustrative tasks, not activities claimed to have been evaluated in this study.

The mentor checks the scope and methodological demands of the task and identifies resources that are actually available. The student searches for material, undertakes the agreed work, records uncertainties, and brings a reasoned account to the review. If the student is unable to start, the first intervention is to reduce or clarify the task and demonstrate an appropriate method. Providing a complete answer would remove an opportunity to practise judgment.

A short record should retain the agreed goal, expected output, review date, and any subsequent adjustment. It need not become a separate administrative form if an existing course or project record captures the same information. The function of documentation is to preserve continuity between encounters.

Adjust task complexity across the undergraduate years

During the first year, guidance should help students understand their discipline and establish workable study habits. Suitable evidence includes a revised study plan, an account of how a learning difficulty was addressed, or an explanation of how a source was located and evaluated. Early access to research can be useful, but publication and competition participation should not become uniform entry-level requirements.

The second year can introduce problem formulation and basic inquiry. Students might turn a broad interest into a question that can be explored with accessible evidence. Feedback should address the relationship between the question, source selection, and proposed method. A short presentation can reveal whether a student understands that relationship more clearly than a polished written product alone.

The third year can offer more sustained project work where appropriate resources exist. Students can undertake bounded responsibilities in research, innovation training, disciplinary competitions, or professional inquiry. Each participant should explain their own contribution and the limitations of the material used. Postgraduate peers may demonstrate techniques and support discussion, while the academic mentor remains responsible for supervision and assessment.

In the final year, guidance can connect thesis work and placement experience with decisions about employment or further study. A student may use earlier records to identify strengths and remaining gaps. These priorities describe a flexible progression, not fixed thresholds: readiness, discipline, disability-related needs, competing commitments, and access to resources may require different routes. The common expectation is a gradual increase in responsibility, rather than a single prescribed sequence of achievements.

Make matching responsive to capacity and access

Before matching, departments should make mentors' areas of expertise, usual modes of guidance, and available opportunities understandable to students. A brief introductory exchange can help students make informed choices. Allocation must also consider workload and the intensity of proposed tasks. Equal numbers of students do not necessarily represent equal supervision demands.

Mutual selection requires safeguards. Students who already understand academic practices may be better placed to approach

popular mentors, while those with less confidence may receive fewer opportunities. Departments should therefore provide an initial advising route for students with uncertain interests, monitor access to substantive tasks, and avoid making prior achievement the sole basis for entry to mentoring.

A scheduled review should allow a task to be modified or the relationship to be reassigned when interests, expertise, or availability remain incompatible. Reassignment should be handled through a clear departmental route so that students can request it without depending entirely on the existing mentor's discretion. Maintaining a productive learning relationship is more useful than treating a fixed allocation as an outcome in itself.

Close the cycle through students' use of feedback

Each task requires an initial agreement, feedback while revision remains possible, and a review of the resulting work. For a short task, written comments may be sufficient. A complex task may need an intermediate conversation. The timing should follow the learning demand rather than a uniform meeting quota.

Feedback should identify a consequential issue in the actual work and invite a feasible response. For example, a mentor might ask a student to distinguish a source's findings from the student's interpretation, or to explain whether an interview question can elicit the information needed. The student then submits a revision and a brief account of what changed, what advice was not adopted, and why. This response makes disagreement and uncertainty discussable.

A recent discussion in this journal draws attention to the assumptions that shape university feedback cultures [5]. In the proposed mechanism, expectations should be addressed explicitly: asking for clarification is legitimate, receiving comments does not imply personal failure, and using feedback involves judgment rather than automatic compliance. This matters when students hesitate to question an experienced academic. Mentors can demonstrate how they evaluate a suggestion and revise their own reasoning.

Align evaluation with learning evidence and realistic workload

A minimal portfolio can include the goal agreement, an initial product, consequential feedback, a revision, and the student's explanation. Evaluation should consider the clarity of the question, appropriateness of evidence, quality of reasoning, and ability to explain revisions. Comparing successive tasks within a student's own record can help identify changes in responsibility. Such judgments require disciplinary interpretation and should not be reduced to a universal numerical score.

Mentor evaluation should consider whether guidance was accessible, specific, and responsive to the student's work. Student views can identify barriers, but satisfaction alone is an incomplete indicator of learning. A small departmental sample of task records, considered alongside student feedback and mentor accounts of workload, can support discussion of quality without requiring every interaction to be documented in detail.

Workload recognition should reflect the nature and intensity of supervision. Shared workshops may address recurring needs efficiently, leaving individual time for decisions that depend on the student's work. Departments should also coordinate requirements across courses, projects, and thesis supervision so that the same activity is not repeatedly reported. A modest pilot within existing resources is preferable to promising an institution-wide model whose staffing conditions have not been examined.

Limitations and a prospective evaluation agenda

The proposal rests on practice reflection and selected literature, rather than a systematic review or a formal qualitative analysis. No participant recruitment, coded interview corpus, comparison group, or measured learning outcome is presented. It cannot establish prevalence, effectiveness, or transferability across institutions. The examples specify how the design could operate; they are not findings about student behaviour.

A prospective pilot should first examine feasibility: whether goals can be agreed within available time, whether students can act on feedback, and whether access differs across student groups. Workload logs, task records, and voluntary interviews could provide complementary evidence. Subsequent outcome evaluation would require a defined cohort, baseline measures, an appropriate comparison strategy, and attention to prior achievement and self-selection. Ethical review and consent requirements should be resolved before collecting research data, and participation in research should be separated from access to mentoring. Evidence of learning gains would be needed before making causal claims or recommending broad adoption.

Conclusion

Undergraduate mentoring becomes more actionable when an allocation of mentors is connected to a recurring sequence of student work. The proposed mechanism links a negotiated goal to a feasible task, a response to feedback, and a review that informs the next step. Flexible progression and capacity-aware matching give that sequence an organizational basis. Its value should be examined through the quality of student decisions and revisions alongside the resources required to support them. For Shihezi University and institutions facing comparable constraints, the framework provides a testable design for individual guidance; whether it improves learning remains an empirical question.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics and Data Availability

This article presents a conceptual framework informed by practice reflection and published literature. It does not report a new study involving human participants, identifiable personal information, or a participant-level dataset. Ethics approval and consent to participate are therefore not applicable to the work reported in this article. No new research dataset was generated or analysed. Consent for publication is not applicable.

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Author Responsibility and Originality

The authors share responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and scholarly standards of this article and for reviewing the final manuscript. This manuscript is original, has not been published, and is not under consideration by any other journal. The author order is Jian Ren, Xuetong Song, and Haiyan Guo.

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