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Understanding human resources work through mentoring: Student learning at the boundary of higher education and working life

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Abstract

Higher education is a formal requirement for most professions in Sweden, yet education alone is often considered insufficient for preparing students for working life. Mentoring, which integrates education and working life, has been identified as important for students' learning, identity development, and transition to work and may be understood as a relational form of work-integrated learning. Despite this, limited research has examined how mentoring can be designed for interdisciplinary programs. This study investigates undergraduate HR students' experiences of an extracurricular mentoring activity and how it contributed to their understanding of the educational content and the human resources (HR) profession. In doing so, it explores the learning potential of mentoring in an interdisciplinary, nonprofessional education program. Written assignments from 79 students who participated in a mentoring activity in a Swedish HR program were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The results showed that mentoring supported students' understanding of the HR profession and encouraged reflection on course content, themselves, and their future professional roles. The activity was described as facilitating reciprocal knowledge exchange between mentees and mentors. At the same time, students experienced tensions between academic learning and practical application, with working life often perceived as a more authentic and practice-oriented source of knowledge than the learning and knowledge acquired in educational contexts. The study highlights mentoring as a means of supporting professional identity formation, bridging theory and practice, and strengthening learning in interdisciplinary higher education.

Keywords: Higher education, HR education, Human resources, Theory-practice integration, Mentoring, Work-integrated learning

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Mentoring in HR education: Navigating an ambiguous profession

Mentoring has been described as an activity that not only supports students' transition from the educational setting to practice but also improves academic performance and professional development (Gershenfeld, 2014; Harrison et al., 2023; Lunsford et al., 2017). Such an activity could be particularly relevant for students in human resources (HR) education, where practical knowledge of, for example, interpersonal dynamics, recruitment, labor laws, and organizational development is crucial but cannot be fully acquired through academic studies alone (e.g., Patterson, 2024). In Sweden, HR constitutes a heterogeneous and contested field of practice with a relatively weak and historically unclear professional status. Empirical studies have reported how everyday HR practice is often fragmented, reactive, and operationally dominated, with practitioners navigating competing demands related to conflict handling, misconduct, and organizational politics (Häll, 2024; Wallo & Coetzer, 2023). Furthermore, HR has been described as a "profession in the making," marked by ambiguous boundaries and ongoing struggles over legitimacy and identity (Örestig Kling, 2024). Taken together, this suggests that graduates enter a demanding HR practice field where professional knowledge is situational, relational, and deeply embedded in organizational contexts rather than purely strategic.

To facilitate learning and preparation for complex working life, programs within higher education should include not only theoretical and conceptual content but also practical aspects (Billett 2024; Jackson, 2015). Within the field of work-integrated learning (WIL), learning is increasingly conceptualized not merely as participation in workplace contexts but also as relational and pedagogical processes that integrate academic and work-based knowledge through guided participation and reflection (Billett, 2024; Ferns et al., 2025). While placement-based WIL remains central, recent research has highlighted a growing emphasis on nonplacement and mentoring activities that foreground interaction and identity development (Penman et al., 2024). From this perspective, mentoring can be understood as a form of relational WIL in which learning is mediated through sustained interpersonal engagement that supports learners' participation in professional practices, sense-making across contexts, and professional identities development.

Nabi et al. (2025) pointed to a growing interest in mentoring in higher education, suggesting that this is due to the increasing importance attached to supporting students' transition to work and its potential to facilitate a range of career development outcomes. Given the possible benefits of integrating practice and education from a student perspective, there is a need to investigate students' experiences of activities aimed at such integration or connection (Palmer et al., 2015). Still, there is limited knowledge about how mentoring can support students during their education, and there is no consensus on what activities should be included or how they should be designed to provide support to students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Nuis et al., 2023). In HR professions, while mentoring is often part of talent development strategies and career growth (Crawshaw & Game, 2015), there is limited knowledge about mentoring in undergraduate education. Previous research has primarily focused on mentoring in professional education programs such as nursing, medicine, and engineering education, implying that less is known about mentorship in nonregulated professional programs, such as HR (e.g., Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). Against this background, the aim of this study was to investigate students' experiences of an extracurricular mentoring activity during undergraduate HR education. The study is guided by the following research question:

- How does mentoring contribute to HR students' understanding of educational content and the HR profession?

Conceptual definition

This study uses the terms "mentoring" and "mentoring activities." Nuis et al. (2023, p. 7) defined *mentoring* as follows: A formalized process based on a developmental relationship between two persons in which one person is more experienced (mentor) than the other (mentee). The mentor provides support, more specifically career, emotional, psychosocial, psychological, and academic support, to promote and facilitate student success, competence development, and career development. *Mentoring activities* concern planned and organized activities, which take place within an educational setting to support, for example, mentees' learning and development (e.g., Sng et al., 2017).

Two additional key concepts are "theory" and "practice." *Theory* refers to the content conveyed to students in nonprofessional educational settings. When theoretical knowledge is transformed through action and practical experience,

it becomes contextualized and put into practice (Eraut, 2012). *Practice*, in turn, refers to knowledge derived from individual actions and experiences that is important for developing professional expertise (e.g., Eraut, 2000).

Mentoring in educational contexts

In educational contexts, the dynamic reciprocal process of mentoring can occur between faculty and students, between staff and students, or between students and is enabled by different types of activities (Gershenfeld, 2014; Lunsford et al., 2017; Penman et al., 2024). These relationships can be distinguished by their function, structure, source, and duration. Definitions of mentoring vary between educational contexts—such as universities, faculties, and programs—highlighting the challenge of identifying one universal definition (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Lunsford et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2015). This may be problematic, especially with regard to interpreting and generalizing research results (Lunsford et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2015). The variation in undergraduate mentoring programs and activities in terms of duration, frequency, degree of formalization, and sources of mentoring (Lunsford et al., 2017) makes it difficult to compare outcomes across mentoring activities, highlighting the need for continued research on different mentoring activities in various educational contexts and programs. This variation also reflects the varying functions that mentoring can entail, although its overall goal is to assist students in achieving social and professional success as well as personal goals (Palmer et al., 2015).

Mentoring activities can be found in various forms of education and reflect different learning environments. Studies in nursing educational contexts have reported that mentoring is typically focused on ethical and emotional challenges (e.g., Ehrich et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2023), while mentoring activities for engineering students are directed at career paths (e.g., Bilgin et al., 2022). Unlike professional programs with clearly defined career outcomes, theoretical and multi-/interdisciplinary programs, such as HR education, often lead to open-ended career paths. Mentoring within such programs can therefore be important for illustrating practical aspects and future career trajectories (Patterson, 2024). With fewer practical elements naturally embedded in the curriculum, these programs may pose difficulties in providing students with tools that can ease their transition into working life.

A recent systematic review showed that mentoring in higher education is generally associated with positive student career development outcomes, particularly regarding career choice, professional identity, and transitions into work, while highlighting variation depending on mentoring design and context. It also highlighted the role and possible impact of the mentor–mentee relationship on an individual level, particularly in relation to mentees' learning, well-being, and career development (Nabi et al., 2025). In addition, a variety of possible student outcomes have been identified, such as a sense of belonging and self-confidence regarding skills and abilities for professional development and learning processes (Lunsford et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2015). By socializing students into future roles, mentors can act as role models and coaches, sharing knowledge and insights that can shape professional skills, values, and networks, thereby motivating studies and enhancing employment prospects (Nuis et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2015). The relational character of mentoring implies a view of learning and knowledge development as situated in personal and cultural contexts, as well as social and enabled through interaction. As indicated above, this learning not only concerns learning the role—that is, tasks, procedures, and professional skills—but also involves a personal dimension. Mentoring as an activity at the intersection of studies and working life is therefore part of students' professional and personal identity formation (Nuis et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2015). However, mentoring is not solely about the influence of one party on another. The responsibility of mentees to actively learn and grow from mentoring activities should not be neglected (Saranya et al., 2022).

Despite its many benefits, mentoring may also involve challenges and potential drawbacks. The value of a mentoring relationship may be limited and, in some cases, even detrimental if the mentee feels constrained, encounters barriers, or if programs or activities are designed according to a standardized approach (Kram, 1983; Nabi et al., 2025; Nuis et al., 2023). Negative mentoring experiences may reduce mentees' self-esteem and contribute to psychological strain and fear (Eby et al., 2010). However, such issues—including feelings of frustration, lack of feedback, and unsupportive social contexts—have primarily been identified in longer-term mentoring relationships, such as those examined in Kram's studies of multi-year mentoring (Andrews & Chilton, 2000).

Another challenge concerns mismatched expectations between mentors and mentees, as well as low student engagement, which may contribute to an unsuccessful relationship (Al-Aqeel & Alhumaid, 2024; Eby et al., 2010). This highlights the importance of carefully considering the matching process. In addition, limited time and resources may hinder

mentoring outcomes, as short-term activities can limit the development of trust and relational depth (Al-Aqeel & Alhumaid, 2024; Andrews & Chilton, 2000). Clear and shared expectations are therefore essential for creating meaningful mentoring relationships (Akanegbu & Iheduru-Andersson, 2022).

Mentoring functions and frame of reference

According to Kram (1983), individuals seek mentoring relationships to address current or future challenges, where mentoring serves two primary functions: career development and psychosocial support. *Career* functions, including coaching, exposure protection, sponsorship, and challenging work assignments, reflect instrumental support that assists mentees in gaining corporate exposure, learning about organizational life, and obtaining promotions. *Psychosocial* functions, including role modeling, acceptance-confirmation, counseling, and friendship, enhance mentees' sense of competence, effectiveness, and self-worth. Adding Mezirow's (1981, 1997) frame of reference to Kram's conceptual model enables a broader understanding of mentoring activities in educational programs. These perspectives complement each other by describing how mentoring can support cognitive and action-oriented changes in the individual. The *frame of reference* encompasses an individual's process of acquiring a body of experience, including associations, concepts, values, and feelings that shape their life and guide actions. However, individuals seek strategies to manage life experiences and, by doing so, change their frame of reference. Transformative learning occurs when individuals face a "disorienting dilemma," revealing limitations in existing knowledge (Mezirow, 1981). This prompts active and critical reflection, enabling a change in the existing frame of reference and suggesting that undergraduate students need to develop critical thinking skills to navigate situations beyond their current frame of reference. Within the mentoring context, such development requires activities that are supportive, challenging, and intellectually engaging. Consequently, the concept of "frame of reference" is useful for examining how mentoring can facilitate students' critical reflection on assumptions, the integration of new and existing knowledge, and the promotion of both personal and academic growth.

To conclude, Kram's (1983) model has the capacity to facilitate a deeper understanding of students' experiences of mentoring, as well as the potential of mentoring activities to support learning and enhance understanding of the HR profession. The model highlights the importance of concrete support, exposure, and opportunities for identity development, while Mezirow's (1981, 1997) perspective helps identify the more cognitive dimensions of the process. This includes students' reflections on their experiences to make sense of and learn from them, thereby developing new insights. Using both perspectives enables a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of mentoring experiences, focusing not only on concrete and immediate experiences but also on changes in ways of thinking and perceiving. In this context, such changes relate to the understanding of HR education and the HR profession as a professional field.

Given the limited prior research on mentoring in nonprofessional and interdisciplinary higher education programs, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of how such activities can be designed and what they should include. This study addresses this gap by examining students' experiences of a mentoring activity in this context, with a particular focus on how they perceive its relevance to their understanding of educational content and to their emerging professional understanding. By providing insight into how students engage with and make sense of mentoring as a noncurricular activity, the study contributes to the mentoring literature, as well as to higher education practice. This is particularly important for supporting students' transition from education to working life, and research insights may also be used to inform the design of educational programs to better prepare students for the complexities of their future professional practice in HR, for example.

Research methodology

With the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of students' experiences of mentoring and its possible contribution to their learning and understanding of their future profession, this study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design (Bryman, 2018). Such a design is considered appropriate for developing a deeper understanding of key aspects and common patterns within the investigated area rather than generating broad, generalizable results.

Setting

This study focuses on mentoring relationships between experienced HR professionals and small groups of students (2–3 individuals) in an undergraduate bachelor's HR program at a university in western Sweden. The university has approximately 13,500 students, of whom 5600 are full-time, with 60–80 students enrolling in the HR program each fall. The university offers mentoring opportunities during the second year of the HR program as a noncredit activity. The HR program spans three years and covers topics such as work psychology, learning and competence development, work environment, recruitment and talent management, labor law, and research methods. Upon completion, students receive a bachelor's degree in either psychology or the educational sciences.

A mentoring activity has been offered at the university since 2009. The aim is to connect students with professionals who can inspire them to enhance their knowledge and support WIL. Mentors who have extensive work experience, but no formal mentor training participate voluntarily without financial compensation. Students are usually assigned a mentor by the university, although some may share a mentor or recruit their own. Student–mentor meetings, held either in person or online, take place 4–6 times per academic year and focus on topics chosen by the students related to their courses, education, HR work, or the profession. Students receive a certificate on graduation, acknowledging their participation in the mentoring activity.

Data

The mentoring activity concludes with an individual, noncredit written assignment of 1200–1800 words, in which students reflect on mentoring as a learning experience. Students are asked to reflect on the relationship between mentoring and their understanding of future professional areas, how mentoring introduces them to and helps them identify with various HR roles, and the integration of learning from their education and practice-oriented mentoring discussions. The empirical basis for this study consisted of a complete population sample of 82 assignments collected from three student-mentoring cohorts between 2021 and 2024. These cohorts were chosen because the assignments were available digitally via the university's educational platform, starting with the assignment submission for students participating in the activity during the 2021/2022 academic year. It should be noted that no changes were made to the structure and procedure of the mentoring activity during these years.

Among students enrolled in the HR program during the period, 33% ($n = 34$) in 2021/2022, 36% ($n = 28$) in 2022/2023, and 33% ($n = 20$) in 2023/2024 participated in this extracurricular activity, and all participants submitted a written assignment. However, three assignments were excluded from this study: one student declined participation in the research, and two students who had submitted assignments did not complete the mentoring program and thus submitted incomplete assignments. This resulted in a final sample of 79 assignments for analysis. Assignments were retrieved from the educational platform used for course delivery, where students submitted examinations and assignments.

The division of assignments into cohorts, both in this section and in the results, was solely for practical reasons and to keep the assignments separate. The intention was not to compare the different cohorts but rather to explore HR students' experiences of the mentoring activity in general, regardless of the year in which they participated. This is particularly relevant, given that there were no changes in the design of the activity during these years, and the assignment followed the same structure throughout the period.

Analysis

As the empirical material consisted of individual written reflections ($n = 79$), no prior processing was needed before the analysis. A thematic inductive analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted to address the study's purpose and research questions. The inductive approach meant that the theoretical perspectives of Kram (1983) and Mezirow (1981, 1997) were introduced in later stages of interpreting the results. The first step involved the authors individually reading all the texts to familiarize themselves with and understand their content, accompanied by occasional joint discussions to share impressions without influencing each other's understanding. During this phase, notes were taken on content relevant to the study's aim as well as potential interpretations and connections in the data. Subsequently, a joint discussion was held to review initial thoughts, identify emerging patterns, and explore similarities and differences in interpretation.

In the next step, the material was coded inductively, organizing and reducing data by merging excerpts from the empirical material into initial codes reflecting patterns relevant to the study's aim. Each author conducted this separately,

leading to three tables with coded excerpts and proposed code names. Subsequently, we collaboratively compared the tables to identify similarities and differences in patterns, which were largely consistent across analyses. The individual analyses were compiled into a common document, and further analysis was conducted jointly. Codes were reexamined and reworked where needed to ensure their relevance to the study aim. Coded segments were adjusted where necessary, with some codes removed and others added. To further reduce and organize the empirical material, codes with mutual relevance were grouped into initial themes. This work led to insights into the varying levels of the initially created themes, and further analysis resulted in the identification of both themes and subthemes and further refinement and organization of the results. Themes were refined and renamed to accurately reflect the content and meaning of the data and to ensure coherence, accuracy, and alignment with overall findings (see Table 1). The final step of the analysis involved interpreting the findings through the study's theoretical perspectives and in relation to relevant previous research, supporting the discussion of the results and their implications. The combination of individual and collaborative analyses, along with the authors' prior experience in qualitative analysis, strengthened the trustworthiness of the results.

<i>Themes</i>	Perspectives on the HR profession	Perspectives on the education	Perspectives on oneself
<i>Subthemes</i>	Ideas of professional roles Ideas of professional approaches Insight to the complexity of HR	Contextualizing knowledge Complementing knowledge Conflicting knowledge Knowledge exchange	The journey of becoming Motivation
<i>Examples of codes</i>	Overall picture Glimpse of 'reality, i.e. practice The breadth of profession The preconditions of practical work Mentor responding to questions/sounding board Mentor as a professional guide Mentor as a role model The importance of a professional approach The "how" of HR work (Managing) challenges of HR work Variations of HR work and tasks Variations of responsibilities	Operationalize knowledge Concretization Understanding theory Integrate theoretical and practical aspects Conflicting theory or other aspects of knowledge from the education Specificity and situated aspects of knowledge Mentor learning from the students/exchange Opportunities to ask questions related to specific courses Challenges with identifying questions Preparation for mentor meetings	Identity (New) ideas about their future Inspiration Confidence in abilities Preparing for work life Calming Permissive climate for learning

Table 1: Table illustrating the analysis process.

Ethical considerations

This study adheres to ethical guidelines in accordance with the Swedish Research Council (2024). Before the study commenced, a representative for the Ethics Review Board with experience in both national and local ethical review processes was consulted, and the representative concluded orally that formal ethical approval was not required. The assignment included information stating that the text would not be assessed or commented on but that it might be used for

research purposes. Upon submission of the assignment, students were asked to indicate whether they agreed to having their text used in the research. By affirming, they were considered to have provided informed written consent.

Assignments were retrieved from the educational platform on which they had been submitted. After the files were downloaded, they were saved and anonymized by assigning each text a number. These files were used for the analysis. Given that the aim of the study was not to assess students' texts or performance in the activity but rather to explore their experiences with it, it was not relevant to focus in more detail on who the students were. Instead, the focus was on their reflections on the activity as such.

The empirical material was stored in a protected folder accessible only to the research group and the course manager. In reporting the results, names, grades, mentor identities, and workplaces are not disclosed, in line with confidentiality principles. The study focuses on students' experiences of mentoring as a learning activity, emphasizing content and nature of the mentoring activity and its perceived contribution to learning, as well as to understanding their education and future professional fields, rather than the specific workplace context.

Results

The analysis includes three themes (see Table 2), each with its own subthemes. Excerpts from assignments that are representative of the dataset illustrate the themes and enhance the credibility of the analysis. Excerpts from all three cohorts were selected to ensure representation across the dataset. Students from the 2021/2022 cohort are labeled "1.XX," those from the 2022/2023 cohort "2.XX," and those from the 2023/2024 cohort "3.XX."

Themes	Subthemes
Perspectives on education	Contextualizing knowledge
	Complementing knowledge
	Conflicting knowledge
	Knowledge exchange
Perspectives on the HR profession	Ideas of professional roles
	Insight into the complexity of HR
Perspectives on oneself	The journey of becoming
	Motivation

Table 2: Themes and subthemes.

Perspectives on education

The analysis indicates that discussing theoretical knowledge and concepts with a mentor can improve students' understanding of theoretical knowledge and make it more accessible. A significant part of the mentoring activity contributed to *contextualizing*, *complementing*, *conflicting*, and *exchanging knowledge*, which was essential for students in developing perspectives on academic knowledge.

Contextualizing knowledge

Meetings with the mentor were often inspired by the courses in which students were enrolled. This provided students with an opportunity to explore how knowledge and perspectives from their courses could be applied in the HR field. Discussions

with the mentor were repeatedly described by students as enhancing the meaningfulness of the course content and their understanding of it:

The mentoring activity has worked well and has truly put theory into practice. It has become a valuable, and at times crucial, element in understanding how theory can be applied in practice. It has also provided the perspective that theory often has more dimensions than what is taught during education. (1.3)

Students experienced mentoring as facilitating the application of academic knowledge in practical contexts, thereby broadening their understanding of course content and supporting the integration of theory and practice:

During our mentoring conversations, we discussed different theories and methods, and I got to see how these were applied in real recruitment situations. This enabled me to see the connection between theory and practice and to understand why certain strategies work better than others in certain situations. (3.11)

Mentoring was seen as valuable among students without work experience and among those facing difficulties imagining their future HR work. One example highlighted the difficulty in linking theory to practice—a challenge for which mentoring proved particularly valuable: “It can be difficult to only read in books and not to have a real or actual example to ‘hang’ the literature on” (1.14). On the other hand, integrating content and experiences from ongoing courses into mentoring conversations was described by some as posing challenges:

It could sometimes be difficult to have a constructive dialog; it really depended on which course(s) we had covered since our last meeting. Some courses made it significantly easier to ask the mentor concrete questions than others, not only depending on the subject but also on the extent to which we had covered the subject during lectures and seminars. (2.24)

Another highlighted aspect was the recognition that meaningful mentoring sessions require personal responsibility and effort from the student, as well as effective use of time to support learning.

Complementing knowledge

The mentoring activity was perceived as an opportunity to clarify educational content that could be difficult to apply in practice—for example, by enhancing understanding of how theoretical knowledge can be translated into future professional contexts. Students frequently noted that this experience would likely support their understanding of future professional tasks:

Both mentoring and other parts of the education feel incredibly valuable for adding greater substance to the education and for preparing for our future profession (1.28)

Students appreciated the mentor’s experiential knowledge shared during the sessions. The mentor’s expertise and perspectives complemented the students’ own learning and helped them better understand educational content, thereby making HR work more tangible. The importance of “meet[ing] a mentor who can reflect reality in a more reasonable way than what [the university] can” (1.10) was emphasized. A recurring experience was that students described mentoring as a “bridge” between theory and practice, offering supplementary clarifications of theories or concepts introduced in courses:

The gap [between theory and practice] feels a little smaller since I have been able to tell her what I have learned in school, and she has been able to tell me how she has worked or currently works with this in her current position. (1.22)

Mentoring was described as providing practical examples and experience-based insights, serving as a valuable complement by offering perspectives beyond those available from lecturers:

Sometimes it can be difficult to directly apply theory [to potential practical situations], which is why advice and insights from professionals about real-world practice can be valuable (3.7)

Conflicting knowledge

Some students described tensions between theoretical knowledge and perspectives gained through discussions with their mentors. Such conflicts were reported to arise in practice when these perspectives challenged or even contradicted what had been taught in academic courses. In these accounts, theory was often associated with coursework and abstract knowledge, whereas practice was linked to concrete workplace realities. Many students emphasized the value of “real-life” perspectives from practice settings, as these were perceived to provide a broader and more applied understanding. For example, a majority of the students expressed appreciation for mentoring, describing it as “reflecting reality in a more reasonable way than higher education can” (1.10). One student exemplified this broader pattern, stating:

In education, there is, at times, a strong focus on theory, and therefore it has been very beneficial to complement it with ‘real-life’ perspectives in the discussions, as it becomes evident that the views sometimes differ. (2.6)

In some cases, students described practice as providing more valuable insights than theory, highlighting how mentoring could reshape their understanding of what constitutes relevant knowledge:

What we learn at the university is the theoretical part, which I also define as “what we should think about” and “the fundamentals” (...). What the mentoring activity also highlighted to me is that, in practical work, action is more important than whatever the theory says. (3.18)

The assignments portrayed working life as the authentic representation of what students commonly referred to as “reality”—that is, professional practice rather than the educational context. Moreover, student perspectives pointed to occasional tensions between different forms of knowledge and challenges in translating theory into practice, which mentoring was perceived to help address.

Knowledge exchange

The results also indicated that students viewed the mentor as a “reflection partner,” facilitating learning and promoting knowledge exchange:

It is fun to see that the studies have such a ‘direct’ connection to working life and that we can create some kind of value for the mentors, too, at such an early stage of the education. (1.18)

The mentoring relationship was described as a reciprocal, “two-way” process of knowledge exchange, benefiting both the students and the mentor. Students valued having a mentor to reflect with and discuss perspectives, while also perceiving that contributing to the mentor’s perspectives and knowledge supported their own development:

My hope is that we, as students, have succeeded in adding something to our mentor during this time, as well as gaining increased knowledge and understanding of our future profession and practical work. (2.24)

Furthermore, mentors’ openness and receptiveness to new insights were described as prerequisites for enabling mutual learning:

In addition to teaching, she was also open to learning herself. She emphasized on several occasions that she saw this as an opportunity to stay updated and to always be on her toes. (3.7)

Thus, students were described as contributing new perspectives and knowledge derived from their education.

Perspectives on the HR profession

Within this theme, two subthemes were identified concerning students' perceptions of their future profession: *ideas of professional roles*, referring to attitudes toward and understandings of the HR profession, and *insight into the complexity of HR*, reflecting perceived challenges that are less emphasized in coursework and highlighting students' perceptions of the complexity of HR work.

Ideas of professional roles

This subtheme highlights students' enhanced understanding of future work in the HR field as facilitated by the mentoring activity. Participants reported that mentoring provided a broader understanding of HR tasks and functions than their academic studies had offered. It also introduced them to roles and career paths they had not previously considered, fostering a sense of direction and alignment with their professional interests. A key factor in this process reported by many students was exposure to mentors' experiences and career trajectories:

Our mentor has also given us a broader insight into HR work from different levels and perspectives by bringing colleagues to some of our mentor meetings. (3.1)

Through these interactions, students gained a deeper understanding of prospective professional roles and how a career in HR may be carried out in practice.

Furthermore, workplace visits were highlighted as valuable for contextualizing the challenges with which students were grappling. Some students reflected that while the mentoring activity enhanced their understanding of HR work through dialog, the limited inclusion of practical elements, such as workplace visits or hands-on tasks, restricted their ability to fully grasp work contexts, roles, and responsibilities. Moreover, the insights gained were often confined to the mentor's specific area of expertise, which limited mentees' broader understanding of the HR profession. For example, one student wrote:

Because my mentor primarily works with recruitment, this is mostly what they have been able and willing to talk about. (2.25)

Insights into the complexity of HR

This subtheme highlights students' awareness of the challenges and complexities of HR work. Through mentoring, students described gaining insights into demanding situations and the emotional demands that HR professionals may face. In most assignments, moments of realization emerged regarding what the profession truly entails:

At times, in school, it is like it is a bit romanticized; it sounds easy and fun to work for and with people but hearing experiences from reality provides—probably a wise and needed—dose of perspectives. For example, the amount of misconduct and abuse that may actually occur in the workplace. How difficult it can be to prove something that occurred at the workplace and remove the employee. (2.6)

In some cases, students noted that the complexity of HR work revealed a recurring gap between academic and practical knowledge. However, this discrepancy was perceived as both challenging and beneficial:

Through our conversations and my practical experiences, I have gained a better view of the challenges and opportunities that exist in the field. (3.11)

The mentoring activity thus provided valuable perspectives, supporting students' preparation for working life while reinforcing their educational foundation:

The combination of mentoring and (work-related) cases will provide us, as university students, with a head start into professional life, where we hopefully feel more prepared for what is to come compared to other students with a more theoretically oriented education. Our prior knowledge will be different, and hopefully we will not be as "shocked" when we enter working life. (2.26)

Perspectives on oneself

The final theme comprises two sub-themes, *the journey of becoming* and *motivation*, illustrating how mentoring supports students in reflecting on themselves in relation to both their educational experiences and their future professional lives. These findings also broaden the understanding of mentoring by showing that it contributes not only to students' understanding of educational content and the HR profession but also to their ongoing professional identity formation.

The journey of becoming

Meetings with mentors were described as valuable opportunities for personal development. Participants expressed positive emotions and gratitude for the insights gained, both in the short and the long term. The interactions encouraged reflection on their future roles as HR professionals, including considerations of responsibilities, professional identity, and the type of practitioner they wished to become. Mentors shared concrete examples from daily work, illustrating challenges and practices in the field, which provided "aha!" moments and deepened understanding. Students repeatedly noted that these discussions offered perspectives rarely covered in their academic courses and thus contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the HR profession:

I have learned that I do not need to know everything when I enter working life. Personally, I was previously very stuck in the idea that I would mostly be working with recruitment, but thanks to my mentor and teachers at the university, I have learned that this is not the case. (1.22)

Furthermore, as part of their "becoming" journey, meetings with the mentor were described as helping students clarify their self-understanding in relation to their future professional roles:

The HR program and the courses we have taken have covered many different areas, which, at times, have led to a feeling of "What am I actually supposed to do and know?" Through the mentoring, I have come to an understanding and acceptance that the field is very broad, while also realizing that it is possible to narrow down and specialize in the areas that are of greatest personal interest. (2.20)

Motivation

Meetings with mentors were described by most of the students as a source of inspiration and a driver of their ongoing development, both within their studies and in preparation for their future professional careers. One student expressed:

This [mentoring] experience has not only provided me with valuable insights and knowledge but has also inspired me to pursue further development within the HR field" (3.11)

Learning from the mentors' experiences was described as eye-opening and revealed previously unfamiliar knowledge. Meetings with mentors were further described as energizing and as motivating students to engage with future work-related challenges.

In addition to the exchange of knowledge, I felt a positive energy and a strong commitment toward the work I will carry out in the future. Such energy has generated increased motivation and a greater desire for me, as a student, to complete my degree and enter working life equipped with valuable tips and knowledge. (1.32)

Conversations with the mentor also covered career choices and pathways to success in the profession, thereby contributing to the activity's motivational impact. Furthermore, mentors' relaxed approach to challenging theoretical and practical questions was perceived as enhancing students' motivation for learning:

Mentoring has played a significant role in shaping my view of the professional role and approach within the field of HR by softening the underlying seriousness that often comes with courses. (2.1)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate students' experiences of an extracurricular mentoring activity and its contribution to their understanding of educational content and the HR profession. The findings indicate that participation in a mentoring activity can broaden students' perspectives on (a) the content and application of their education, (b) HR as a profession, and (c) their own personal and professional development. Overall, these outcomes were perceived as predominantly positive and conducive to learning.

Navigating knowledge forms

Regarding perspectives on education, the findings indicate that mentoring supports the contextualization of theoretical knowledge acquired through academic courses. Opportunities for students to reflect on their academic knowledge in relation to mentors' experiences facilitated a deeper understanding of both educational content and the HR field, which aligns with the findings of previous WIL research (e.g., Billett, 2024; Jackson, 2015). The mentoring activity highlighted the gap between academic and practical knowledge (e.g., Billett, 2024; Jackson, 2015) and offered benefits, such as discussing insights and concerns about the future and engaging with case-based education, which helped students prepare for possible challenges, thus easing the transition. In this way, this study suggests that mentoring can serve as a form of WIL activity without necessarily involving traditional workplace placements.

Drawing on Kram's (1983) conceptual framework, the analysis identified both career-related functions of mentoring, such as discussions on HR challenges and guidance on navigating the field, helping bridge the gap between academic study and professional practice. This resonates with previous research highlighting how mentoring strengthens the practical applicability of academic knowledge and facilitates its integration into professional contexts (Billett, 2024; Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, the analysis indicated that mentors functioned as role models and facilitators of industry-specific knowledge, providing insights not readily accessible through academic studies (cf. Patterson, 2024).

Such insights are particularly relevant, given that mentoring is more commonly integrated into professional education programs, while its role and potential in theoretical or interdisciplinary programs, such as the HR program, remain less explored (e.g., Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). The impact of mentoring extends beyond immediate career prospects, as it can motivate students and enhance their engagement and satisfaction with their studies (Lunsford et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2015). Therefore, mentoring may also be relevant in the design of interdisciplinary higher education programs, where career trajectories are less clearly defined than in professional programs (e.g., Patterson, 2024).

However, certain aspects challenged the learning process enabled by the mentoring activity. These primarily pertained to students' preparation and expectations. Another challenge was the encouragement to focus on course-related questions, which sometimes restricted the discussions, as students struggled to formulate questions. Moreover, being assigned a mentor with a narrowly defined HR role (e.g., recruitment) was perceived by some students as limiting the breadth of the mentoring experience. This may be understood as a form of mentor-mentee mismatch, a challenge identified in previous research (e.g., Al-Aqeel & Alhumaiad, 2024). Given that mentors' professional experience and role-model function are considered central to successful mentoring (Harris, 2002; Nuis et al., 2023), such mismatches may contribute to frustration and a perceived lack of relevant feedback. These findings underscore the importance of a deliberate matching process, where mentors' backgrounds and areas of expertise are aligned with students' interests and expectations. Providing access to a broader range of professional expertise may strengthen reciprocal relationships and support positive experiences for both mentors and mentees (e.g. Andrews & Chilton, 2000; Saranya et al., 2022), consistent with Kram's (1983) conceptualization of mentoring as a reciprocal developmental relationship.

Apart from providing complementary knowledge, the results also reveal situations of conflicting knowledge from the students' perspectives. Mentoring sometimes exposed different or unexpected views on professional practice. A central concern involved the value of different forms of knowledge, where practical knowledge was often perceived as superior to the theoretical knowledge acquired through education. This suggests that students may often implicitly construct a distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, where workplace experience is regarded as more authentic or legitimate than knowledge acquired through formal education. Such perceptions may influence how students understand and value educational knowledge. Although mentoring is intended to bridge theory and practice, there is a risk that it may reinforce this divide by positioning workplace experience as the primary source of legitimate knowledge (Ferm, 2021;

Schaap et al., 2012). This may help explain students' positive experiences of mentoring: mentors were seen as helping students make sense of knowledge from their education, conveying practice-related skills, professional values, and networking opportunities, which are directly linked to employability and are therefore especially attractive to students (Palmer et al., 2015). However, this finding suggests that mentoring may, at times, accentuate rather than integrate diverse forms of knowledge, thereby underscoring the responsibility of educational institutions to equip students with the capacity to interpret and navigate such encounters. This gap reflects what Billett (2024) noted can create tensions by reinforcing a perceived divide between theory and practice. The tendency to view practice as "superior" to theory may be interpreted against the backdrop of HR work as a situationally embedded and often weakly formalized knowledge domain (Örestig Kling, 2024; Wallo & Coetzer, 2023).

Another notable finding was the apparent knowledge exchange between mentor and mentee, as reported by the students. While it might be assumed that learning flows primarily from mentor to mentee, the results and prior research indicate that mentoring often involves mutual benefits and that both parties contribute their own knowledge and interests (e.g., Saranya et al., 2022). Students contribute insights into theoretical perspectives and educational content, while mentors offer practical HR experience, creating a relationship that fosters learning and challenges the notion of mentors as simply "passing on" knowledge to mentees (e.g., Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). A notable aspect of this experience is that the more experienced person in the mentoring relationship both acknowledges the value of others' perspectives and demonstrates humility while maintaining confidence in their professional role (cf. Harris, 2002; Kumar & Prieto-Flores, 2025). The findings thus suggest that voluntary participation and continuity in mentoring activities throughout the second year of studies, rather than the number of meetings, may be key factors to consider in future mentoring initiatives.

Gaining insight into the profession

Regarding perspectives on the HR profession, the results indicate that mentoring improves students' understanding of HR work and of the variety of opportunities within the field. Students gained knowledge about organizational life and essential professional skills, which aligns with Kram's (1983) *career* functions and supports previous research emphasizing the value of mentoring activities (e.g., Billett, 2024). Given the many opportunities provided by the HR profession, as well as its continuously evolving nature (Ferm et al., 2024; Häll, 2024), it can be challenging for the education program to provide students with sufficient and diverse insights into post-graduation realities. This is especially true if lecturers have limited practical experience, combined with the fact that programs such as HR are not strictly professional education (e.g., Palmer et al., 2015; Patterson, 2024). Engaging students in this process promotes learning both inside and outside the classroom, aligning with Harrison et al.'s (2023) description of learning as a dynamic and adaptable process in both the present and the future.

Increased insight into HR work also revealed its complexity and occasional challenges. This aligns with Kram's (1983) notion that individuals seek relationships to help solve dilemmas. Previous research has similarly emphasized the role of mentoring in integrating knowledge and supporting professional development during the transition from education to practice (Gershenfeld, 2014; Lunsford et al., 2017).

Perspectives on oneself

In addition to the career-related function of mentoring, the results also reflected its *psychosocial* function (Kram, 1983), particularly through the emphasis on relational components that appeared to support students' confidence and identity formation. These findings support the idea that effective learning environments rely not only on cognitive input but also on emotional and interpersonal dimensions (e.g., Billett, 2024; Palmer et al., 2015). The relational aspect further highlights learning and knowledge development as socially and situationally embedded processes shaped through interaction in personal and cultural contexts (Palmer et al., 2015). In this way, mentoring appears to contribute not only to pragmatic and work-related learning but also to broader social and personal development. Such processes of "becoming," both as individuals and future professionals, align with Kram's (1983) dual functions of mentoring. The psychosocial function, in this regard, can foster personal development, a sense of safety, and mutual trust, while also benefiting the mentor through the development of meaningful and purposeful relationships. However, these outcomes seem to depend on the establishment of trust and the mentee's capacity for self-reflection.

Building on this psychosocial dimension (Kram, 1983), mentoring may be especially relevant in educational contexts where learners are still forming their professional identities and encountering challenging or uncertain situations. Such experiences can prompt shifts in their frames of reference (Mezirow, 1981; 1997). The prominence of this function in the results may be related to the students' position in their second year of education, a stage at which questions about future careers become more salient. Mentoring, in this sense, may support students in navigating the uncertainties associated with entering a new professional field, including feelings of doubt and lack of confidence. It can thus facilitate a gradual transformation of uncertainty into acceptance, enabling students to recognize the breadth of the field while beginning to shape their own professional trajectory (Gale & Parker, 2014; MacFarlane, 2018). Furthermore, mentoring may enhance students' understanding of how knowledge is applied across contexts, where transformation depends less on knowledge itself and more on the ability to interpret and apply it through active engagement (cf. Mezirow, 1997).

The results also illustrate how mentoring supports students in defining their lifeworld, where "disturbing dilemmas" emerge from navigating a theoretical, interdisciplinary education combined with an uncertain future and multiple career possibilities (cf. Feng et al., 2025; MacFarlane, 2018). In this process, the mentor's guidance can help students manage these challenges and facilitate shifts in their frames of reference that might otherwise be difficult to achieve (Mezirow, 1981; 1997).

Finally, it is worth noting that despite the relatively limited scope of the mentoring activity in terms of duration, number of meetings, and range of activities, the findings portray mentoring as positive and beneficial. The activity was relatively informal and largely shaped by students' own questions and interests, which may have contributed to its perceived value. Previous research has shown that the commitment and engagement of academia, mentors, and mentees are central to the success of mentoring programs (Wang et al., 2023). Accordingly, the voluntary participation of both mentors and mentees may be considered a favorable condition for mentoring success.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be addressed. First, it was conducted at a single university, within one HR program, and with a single time-point design, which limits the transferability of the findings to other programs and contexts, as well as the ability to identify changes over time. However, the aim was to explore students' experiences of a mentoring activity rather than to examine changes over time. Nevertheless, due to the number of assignments included in the empirical material, the study provides valuable insights into the research topic and offers results that may inform future studies in different educational contexts. A possible risk with this kind of assignment is, naturally, response bias due to social desirability. Students may have formulated responses based on what they believed was expected by the university or the course instructor, or to convey a particular impression of their mentoring experience, rather than reflecting their actual perspectives. However, the fact that assignments were not graded for credit and that mentors did not have access to them may have reduced the risk that students provided answers that were not aligned with their actual experiences. A second limitation concerns the potential impact of the assignment design on students. The assignments included were predetermined, which may have limited how students responded and reflected. However, the authors' awareness of this limitation encouraged a critical approach to the assignments and to the conclusions drawn from them, contributing to the study's trustworthiness. It is also important to note that the students in the mentoring program had completed only the second year of a three-year bachelor's program, meaning that the knowledge gaps and uncertainties they expressed, as well as their perceptions of HR work, could further evolve during their final year. A third limitation concerns the mentors, who were both self-selected and assigned to students. This may have contributed to variations in students' experiences of the mentoring activity, as the mentors' specific fields of work could either facilitate or hinder these experiences, depending on the students' individual interests. Nonetheless, the transparency and reflection evident in the students' assignments were considered to have contributed to nuanced reporting of their experiences, thereby supporting the trustworthiness and relevance of the results.

Conclusion

This study shows that mentoring is a valuable activity that supports students in navigating the complexities of an interdisciplinary undergraduate HR program and in developing their understanding of both educational content and their

future professional field. The findings extend WIL research by illuminating mentoring as a pedagogical arrangement through which academic knowledge, professional identity, and workplace learning are integrated. In this way, mentoring as an activity can help bridge the gap between theory in academic settings and practice in working life, highlighting the need for greater integration between these two learning contexts. At the same time, students need support in understanding how formal knowledge can be translated and applied in practical contexts. Higher education therefore has a responsibility to support this process so that students do not come to perceive theory and practice as separate forms of knowledge. The findings of this study also suggest that WIL does not necessarily require extensive or highly formalized activities to be meaningful, as even smaller-scale initiatives, such as mentoring, can provide valuable learning experiences and strengthen students' professional development (Ferns et al., 2025).

Future research could examine students' preparedness for mentoring activities, such as in terms of prior knowledge and expectations, as well as how such experiences are systematically followed up within the educational framework (e.g., through reflection, supervision, or structured feedback processes). Expanding on previous research indicating the mutual benefits of mentoring and the findings from this study suggesting developmental outcomes for mentors as well, future research could further investigate mentors' experiences using interviews, for example, to facilitate deeper understanding. Particular attention could be given to mentors' perceived needs for preparation and ongoing support, as well as to which organizational structures either facilitate or hinder learning and professional development through the mentoring role.

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Declaration of interests

The authors have nothing to declare.

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