

EXPLORING STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON RESEARCH READINESS AND MENTORSHIP: A CASE STUDY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA

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Abstract: *This study explores the perspectives of students at the University of Craiova regarding their readiness to choose a specific research direction and the role of mentorship in their academic journey. Findings reveal that 66.1% of respondents feel unprepared to select a research trajectory, highlighting the need for additional guidance and resources. Despite this, 73.1% of students expressed confidence in defining their research direction without further assistance, indicating that current support mechanisms may be effective for a majority. However, 78.5% of students reported lacking access to mentors or academic advisors, while 80.3% expressed a strong desire for mentoring in the near future, underlining its perceived value in navigating academic and professional development. Students also identified key areas of support needed, including guidance in research direction (73.9%), project management skills (47.2%), navigating funding processes (42.4%), and publishing strategies (46.4%). These findings underscore the importance of strengthening mentoring programs and academic support initiatives to address diverse student needs, ultimately enhancing research preparedness and career outcomes.*

Keywords: *Student perspectives, research readiness, mentorship, academic guidance, research career, academic support,*

1. Introduction

The transition from undergraduate education to a research-oriented career marks a critical phase in a student's academic journey. Universities play a pivotal role in equipping students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to navigate the complexities of academic research and professional development (for more details see Otovescu, 2015). However, despite the growing emphasis on research as a cornerstone of higher education, many students encounter significant challenges in identifying their research interests, selecting a specific direction, and accessing adequate mentorship. These challenges are particularly pronounced in emerging academic environments, such as the University of Craiova, where institutional support systems for research development are still evolving.

Research readiness, defined as the ability to identify and pursue a coherent research direction, is a multifaceted construct influenced by factors such as prior academic experiences, access to mentoring, and institutional resources. According to Terenzini et al. (1994), students' transition to higher levels of academic engagement is shaped by their exposure to structured guidance and their ability to participate in experiential learning opportunities. This is particularly critical in the context of academic research, where the breadth of potential topics and the complexity of methodologies can overwhelm students lacking adequate support.

Mentorship has been widely recognized as a key enabler of research readiness and academic success. Effective mentoring not only provides students with technical knowledge but also fosters critical thinking, enhances problem-solving abilities, and helps students navigate the professional landscape (Nora & Crisp, 2007). However, disparities in access to mentorship remain a persistent issue in higher education, with many students, especially first-generation and underrepresented groups, lacking access to mentors who can provide personalized guidance and support (Gershenfeld, 2014).

This study aims to explore the perspectives of students at the University of Craiova regarding their readiness to choose a specific research direction and the perceived role of mentorship in facilitating this process. By examining the experiences and expectations of students, the study seeks to provide actionable insights for enhancing academic support systems and fostering a research-oriented culture within the university. The findings are expected to inform the development of targeted interventions, such

as mentoring programs, workshops, and career counseling initiatives, aimed at improving students' research readiness and overall academic outcomes.

2. A brief literature review

The existing literature provides valuable insights into the factors influencing students' research readiness and the role of mentorship in academic success. Several key themes emerge from the body of research, including the importance of early exposure to research opportunities, the impact of institutional support systems, and the role of mentorship in fostering academic and professional growth. Exposure to research activities during undergraduate education has been shown to significantly enhance students' research readiness and career aspirations. Lopatto (2007) found that undergraduate research experiences help students develop critical thinking skills, increase self-confidence, and clarify their career goals. These experiences are particularly beneficial for students in STEM fields, where hands-on engagement with research projects can provide a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts and methodologies.

Institutional support plays a crucial role in shaping students' research experiences. According to Kuh (2008), universities that provide comprehensive support systems, including access to research facilities, funding opportunities, and academic advising, create an environment conducive to student success. However, disparities in resource allocation and administrative inefficiencies can hinder the effectiveness of these support systems, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Altbach et al., 2009). Mentorship is widely regarded as a cornerstone of academic success. Nora and Crisp (2007) conceptualize mentorship as a multidimensional construct encompassing psychological support, career guidance, role modeling, and knowledge sharing. Effective mentors not only help students navigate the academic landscape but also inspire them to pursue ambitious goals and overcome challenges. Research has consistently shown that mentored students are more likely to persist in their academic pursuits, publish research findings, and transition to advanced studies (Schlosser et al., 2011).

Despite its importance, access to mentorship remains uneven across institutions and disciplines. Gershenfeld (2014) highlights the systemic barriers that limit mentorship opportunities for underrepresented students, including implicit biases, limited availability of qualified mentors, and a lack of institutional commitment to mentoring programs. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to create inclusive and accessible mentoring initiatives that cater to diverse student needs.

3. Methods.

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to capture a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and perspectives. The mixed-methods design is particularly suited for exploring complex phenomena, as it allows for the integration of numerical data with rich, contextual insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

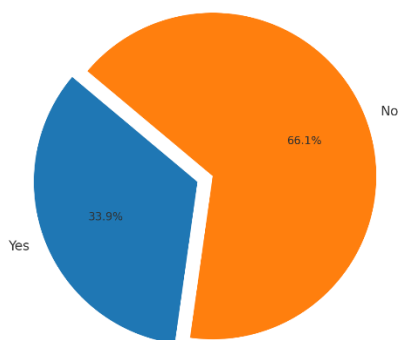
The study involved a total of 502 undergraduate and graduate students from various disciplines at the University of Craiova. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse academic backgrounds and year groups. This approach was chosen to capture the heterogeneity of experiences and perspectives within the student population.

4. Results

From the total number of respondents, 66.1% indicated that they do not feel ready to choose a specific research direction, while 33.9% responded affirmatively. This high percentage suggests that students feel they have not received sufficient information or guidance regarding the available research opportunities. It may also reflect the breadth and complexity of academic research fields, making it difficult for students to decide on a single trajectory.

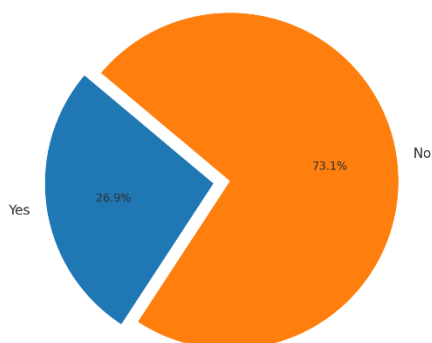
The minority of students who feel ready to choose a specific research direction suggests that there is a segment of the student body with a clear vision for their research career. This group may have benefited from prior experiences or resources that helped them make this decision. These students might already have experience in research projects or be more advanced in their studies, thus having a better understanding of their areas of interest.

Do you feel prepared to choose a specific research direction for your career?
502 responses



The graph above indicates a clear need for additional support and resources to help the majority of students choose their research directions. Universities could use this information to develop initiatives that improve access to research information and strengthen mentoring programs, especially for first-year students who might feel overwhelmed by the diversity of academic options. This approach could significantly enhance the educational experience and better prepare students for successful research careers.

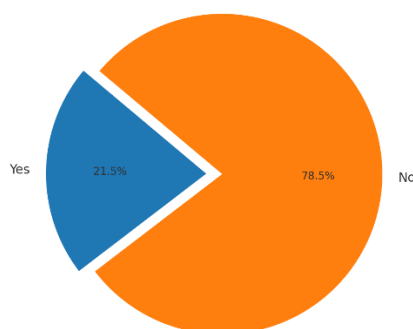
Do you need help defining a clear research direction?
502 responses



From a total of 502 responses, 73.1% of students indicated that they do not need additional help defining a research direction, while 26.9% believe they do need assistance in this regard. The majority of students at the University of Craiova appear confident in their ability to identify and define a specific research direction. This confidence may be attributed to factors such as the quality of education provided by the university, access to good information resources, or experience gained through participation in various research projects during their studies. It also suggests that current guidance and academic support programs may be effective in preparing students to make independent decisions about their academic careers.

The proportion of 26.9% who feel the need for help in defining a research direction highlights the existence of a significant minority of students still facing uncertainties about their academic choices. This segment of the student body could benefit from improved academic and career counseling programs, workshops dedicated to exploring career options in research, and initiatives that facilitate access to mentoring.

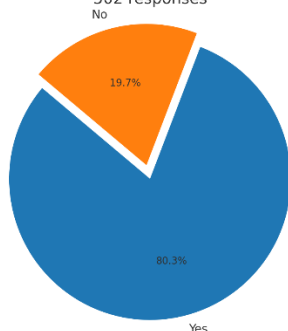
Have you had a mentor or academic advisor in research so far?
502 responses



Of the total responses, 21.5% of students indicated that they have had a mentor or academic advisor in research, while the majority, 78.5%, have not received this type of support. The high percentage of students who have not had a mentor or academic advisor in research suggests a significant gap in access to individualized support within the university. For the 21.5% who have had a mentor or advisor, this indicates a positive experience and access to valuable resources that helped them navigate research. These students' experiences could be used to shape and improve mentoring programs for other students.

Of the 502 students at the University of Craiova, 80.3% indicated that they would like to have a mentor in the near future, while only 19.7% said they would not want a mentor. The overwhelming majority of students who want mentoring reflects a strong recognition of its benefits. This high interest may indicate a desire for additional guidance and support in navigating academic and professional careers, suggesting that students are aware of the challenges posed by research and professional development.

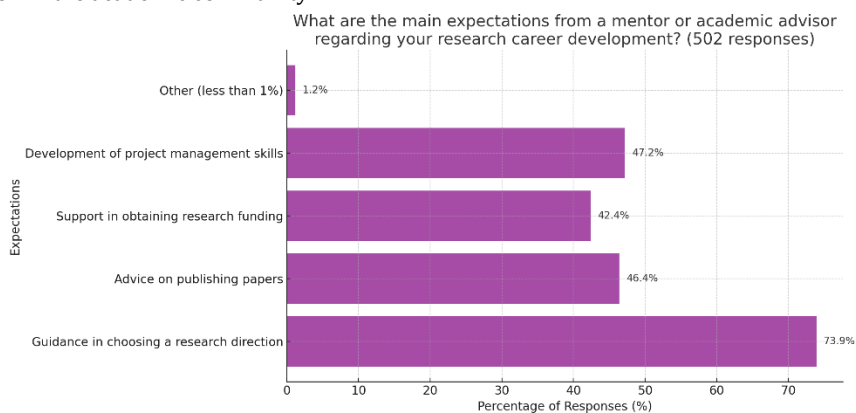
If you haven't had a mentor yet, would you like to have one in the near future?
502 responses



This high demand for mentoring should prompt the university to strengthen and expand existing mentoring programs, ensuring they are accessible and meet students' diverse needs. By acknowledging and addressing the high demand for mentoring, the University of Craiova can significantly improve students' experiences and contribute to their academic and professional success. This indicates an active and engaged student community seeking to maximize the learning and development opportunities provided by the university environment.

Guidance in choosing a research direction is the most requested aspect, with 73.9% of students indicating it as a priority. This reflects an acute need for strategic and decision-making support in establishing and pursuing a coherent and effective research direction. 47.2% of students want support in developing project management skills, suggesting they are aware of the complexity of managing research projects and wish to improve their abilities in this area. With 42.4%, there is a need for assistance in navigating the often complex processes of obtaining funding,

including grant proposal writing strategies and identifying suitable funding sources. Almost half of the respondents (46.4%) consider support in the publishing process important, which is crucial for building a reputation in the academic community.



These expectations reflect an understanding of the complexities and challenges of a research career, where not only technical knowledge but also the ability to navigate the academic and professional landscape is vital. By directly addressing these needs and providing appropriate resources for developing the necessary skills for a successful research career, the University of Craiova can significantly enhance its students' educational experience and academic outcomes.

5. Conclusions

Globally, higher education institutions have recognized the importance of creating supportive environments that promote research engagement and career development. Studies have shown that students who receive structured guidance and mentoring are more likely to develop a clear research focus, achieve academic success, and pursue advanced degrees (Shanahan et al., 2015). By examining the perspectives of students at the University of Craiova, this study sheds light on the challenges and opportunities associated with research readiness and mentorship in higher education. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance academic support systems and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for student success. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance academic support systems and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for student success. Developing structured mentoring programs and providing students with accessible resources tailored to their research needs can bridge gaps in guidance. Such efforts will empower students to make informed decisions about their academic trajectories, ultimately fostering a research-oriented culture. Furthermore, this study highlights the necessity for institutions to address systemic barriers, such as resource disparities and administrative inefficiencies, that hinder the effectiveness of support systems. By leveraging best practices from global academic settings, the University of Craiova can establish robust frameworks that promote equity and inclusion in research opportunities.

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