

Economy Transdisciplinarity Cognition www.ugb.ro/etc	Vol. 27 Issue 2/2024	225 - 232
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Designing and Implementing an Inclusive Peer Mentoring Program in Higher Education

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Abstract: *Mentoring programs in higher education play an essential role in supporting students' academic and personal development. This paper describes the development and implementation process of a mentoring program aimed at fostering academic success, personal growth, and career readiness among students, detailing the steps involved in engaging both mentors and mentees in a higher education institution. Implementing a student mentoring program in higher education requires careful planning, active engagement, and ongoing support. By following these structured steps, institutions can create a supportive environment that enhances student success and fosters a culture of mentorship. From a theoretical point of view, the article frames concepts associated with mentoring, types of mentoring, interculturality, intercultural competences and communication. The method is a descriptive investigation of the implementation process of a peer mentoring program, developed over a period of one year in a higher education institution, involving 24 participants: 6 tutors and 18 mentors. Although there is still no systematic evaluation of the program's impact, the feedback from participants in the previous edition of the program shows its positive effects on: improving students' integration into the institution; increasing their sense of belonging; and developing social and intercultural skills.*

Keywords: *higher education, peer mentoring, inclusive, mentor training, tutor training*

Introduction

Entering higher education institutions is a challenge for students, and support from these institutions is required to help the newly arrived develop academically and personally. One of the possibilities for attaining this goal is through mentoring programs.

The current paper describes how a mentoring program was developed and partially implemented in one of the schools of a Polytechnic Institute in Portugal, referring to the theoretical and practical approaches underlying it.

Last, it considers the current limitations of the developed version of the program, and it points out future perspectives to improve it.

1. Theoretical Framework

This paper aims to describe how a mentoring program was developed and partially implemented. For this purpose, it is essential to understand the basis of mentoring. First, it depends on three main characters: the mentor, the mentee and the tutor. The first is a student already at the academy who shares knowledge, skills and experience to help mentees progress personally, socially, and academically. The second is a new student who joins the mentoring programme. The latter is a teacher responsible for coordinating, supervising and accompanying mentors. They are facilitators in the process of implementing the mentoring program.

The mentoring process relies on the GROW model, a well-established framework for áreas such as coaching and mentoring, attributed to Sir John Whitmore, who introduced it in his book, *Coaching for Performance* [1]. It represents a structured approach to setting realistic and achievable goals to facilitate positive personal and professional development in groups or one-on-one relationships. This model is widely applied due to its simplicity, adaptability, and effectiveness. The GROW model offers a structured yet flexible approach tailored to various mentoring contexts, making it a strong foundation for effective mentorship.

Mentoring is an organizational intervention focused on a relationship between an older, more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced person, the Mentee [2]. The mentee attends a unique organization and communicates with people in a unique context. Therefore, the mentoring program must use flexible models and tools in continuous evolution and customizable to make the mentoring process as efficient and effective as possible [3].

A mentor is a person who has the right attitude, interpersonal communication skills, and mental and physical availability to share knowledge and experiences, bearing in mind the focus of the process, which is the mentee. The mentor must be aware that it is good to share positive and negative experiences and the lessons learned from them. The mentor must be interested and willing to contribute to the mentee's development. The mentor needs to recognize that the time spent in mentoring is an investment and that

the mentor can learn from the mentee and evolve with the mentoring process. This is possible when the mentor can support and cocreate with the mentee. The mentors can come from any function within the organization as long as they have the characteristics and skills and are aligned with the objectives of the Mentoring Program [3].

The mentoring relationship relies on two moments: Pull and Push. During the pull moment, the mentor makes the mentee feel at ease to share his thoughts through, for example, active listening. The mentor facilitates the push moment and also stimulates creative solutions for the problems/ situations the mentee refers to. It is then that the empathic mentor shares knowledge [3].

A mentoring program presupposes gathering information about the characteristics and interests of both mentee and mentor to allow for matching criteria to be drawn. Besides the matching process, the genuine relationship occurs in the real world. There must be empathy to attain happiness, productivity and talent retention [3].

2. Mentoring Programme Presentation

The present study uses a descriptive investigation to examine part of the implementation process of a peer mentoring program developed over one year – in the second semester of the academic year of 2023/24 and part of the first semester of the 2024/25 academic year – at one of the five schools of a Polytechnic Institute.

This Mentoring Program started in 2019 and is still in its early stages. For its development, it relies on peer mentoring. The intervention assumes that the peer group is the young person's first resource in situations of concern or stress, so the mentor (an older student) can provide support in the early stages of problems or emerging difficulties. Therefore, the relationship between the mentor and the mentee is highly valued and must be based on trust and security.

The program is a semi-structured mentoring system that allows for different approaches. Therefore, it is flexible. Besides, it is interactive because it is a reciprocal relationship where both mentor and mentee benefit. A mutual exchange of knowledge, experience, and guidance fosters growth for the mentee and the mentor, creating a synergistic bond that promotes lifelong learning.

These people exchange knowledge and experience; they share decisions and responsibilities to help the mentee work towards mutually defined goals and

objectives. This way, the mentee is the centre and represents the goal, process, and product of mentoring.

The relationship must be built and focused in the right direction. Synchrony, complicity, respect, trust, time, dialogue, and sharing are necessary ingredients of this relationship.

Building and establishing a genuine relationship and support whenever possible is imperative, rather than just asking or wanting to know. While it is true that mentor and mentee benefit from this type of relationship, its success will depend on how both deal with the challenges that arise throughout the process.

The practical support, the relationship developed, and the emotional bonds within it encourage the building of networks and democratic relationships that promote citizenship, as well as a sense of belonging to the institution and well-being.

3. Methodology and Methods

The present study uses a descriptive investigation to examine part of the implementation process of a peer mentoring program developed over one year at a higher education institution. It focuses on comprehensively understanding the program's development, execution, and outcomes through a multi-method approach.

The participants in the study comprise a total of 24 individuals. Six tutors and 18 mentors applied for the mentor's platform. However, one mentor changed schools during the implementation phase, which accounts for 17 mentors.

Four tutors work in two of the three school departments within the institution, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives. One of the departments did not have participants interested. However, the coordination team (2 people) belonged to this department. Besides, the tutors are non-academic.

Data collection used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating multiple sources of information. The primary data collection methods included a systemic revision of the program documentation, including the initial program guidelines, training materials, and implementation protocols. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the program's structural framework.

Second, direct observations were conducted throughout the program's duration. Researchers maintained detailed field notes during the program operation, capturing the nuanced interactions and dynamics between tutors and mentors.

Before the academic year started, mentors and tutors were trained. Meetings were held with all participants and former-year students, and opinions were gathered. This feedback allowed for a structured planning base for the current academic year. Besides, mentors from the school gathered with mentors from other schools of the same polytechnic to draw exercises and activities. Feedback was collected from these meetings as well.

The researchers acknowledged potential limitations, including the relatively small sample size and the context-specific nature of the study. These limitations were carefully considered during data interpretation and analysis. By employing this comprehensive methodology, the study aimed to explore the peer mentoring program's implementation, offering valuable insights into its effectiveness and potential improvements in the described higher education setting.

4. Work Development and Results

4.1. Presentation of the Program Operation

The mentoring program accounts for Tutors, mentors and mentees. Tutors are teachers responsible for coordinating, supervising and accompanying mentors. They are facilitators in the process of implementing the mentoring programme. The Mentor is a student already at the academy who shares knowledge, skills and experience to help mentees progress personally, socially, academically and professionally. Finally, the Mentees are new students who join the mentoring program. They are the reason for the mentoring program.

Before the mentoring program is implemented, tutors and mentors must be trained. The Tutors (teachers) are taught face-to-face, for four hours, in mentoring to train mentors (students) in peer mentoring, using the presentations, exercises and pair/group dynamics they are trained with.

The student mentoring program is segmented into nine stages along two different levels: first, a preparatory training level which is here described, and second, an implementation and evaluation level. These phases and the program's course are planned and scientifically oriented based on the Polytechnic Institute Mentoring Program Manual (2021).

The training level accounts for the promotion and dissemination of the program, which is usually done in each class, sharing experiences from previous years. From then on, students may apply as mentors in an online platform (<https://mentoria.ipv.pt>) and fill in a questionnaire that will serve as the basis for future matching with their mentees. Afterwards, they are trained for 8 hours. The training sessions allow them to be prepared before the new students arrive and before they are accessible to offer help whenever necessary (within agreed limits).

4.2. Results - Preparation Phase

During the second semester of the academic year of 2023/24, tutors and mentors were trained. The tutors of the whole institution (5 schools in total) were trained at the Polytechnic Central Services building to optimise human resources and save time. This year, the school accounted for four academics and two non-academics doing the training.

It is essential to highlight that non-academics should get involved in mentoring because they are also approached by students in case of problems or doubts. However, their participation was not expected because non-academics cannot train mentors, which has hindered their involvement in previous training editions. This year, however, two non-academics got involved. The coordination team supported their interest and enthusiasm and provided bureaucratic and technical support for them to attend the training.

Conversely, the mentors were trained by the tutors in their schools. Despite the efforts of setting a time and date suitable for all, five students missed the whole or part of the training. In this case, the school tutors needed to organise themselves so that the missing sessions would be repeated and every student was provided with training.

After training tutors and mentors, getting feedback from previous years' mentors and getting the new mentors' ideas to set up the program for the following year was necessary. The direct observation and field notes allow us to inform on the needs for improvement during the preparation phase, which are systematised in Table 1.

Table 1. Feedback on the Need for Improvement in the Preparation Phase

1)	Prepare activities in advance
2)	Prepare guidelines for each activity
3)	Read the guidelines and select the ones each mentor identifies with and wishes to implement
4)	Prepare the material needed before the 2023/24 academic year ends
5)	Prepare a work schedule because students have no classes during the application period.

6)	Create a social network group to keep in contact and solve potential problems.
7)	Set a meeting before the start of the program (online or in person)
8)	Find a place to store all the mentoring material accessible to all
9)	Find a support person for each day in case a main person misses or material lacks.

Note: Authors' elaboration based on direct observation and field notes

Furthermore, the aspects addressed in this phase point to several critical areas of the mentoring program operation. Students showed **Proactive Planning**, ensuring all activities, guidelines, and schedules were prepared well. Mentor engagement was achieved by selecting guidelines they resonated with and committing to the program. **Resource Allocation** ensured that all necessary materials were ready and accessible. Mentors showed **Contingency Planning** by having backup support and a communication channel for problem-solving.

There was also evidence of **orientation conducted during** a pre-program meeting to align expectations and provide necessary information. The team also demonstrated **Flexibility** when it adapted to the academic calendar and managed student availability. Finally, the mentors gave relevance to **Accessibility** by creating a centralized storage for mentoring materials.

Conclusions

During the Preparation phase, it is expected that next year, more non-academics might take the mentoring training because all staff in higher education can be approached by students in search of help and orientation. The feedback from the current non-academic mentors may contribute to developing enthusiasm for taking the training among the remaining non-academic staff.

Second, it is crucial to allow mentors to brainstorm during the program operation; otherwise, improvement may be at risk, and errors may be repeated. Mentors' impressions and comments are essential for a well-informed mentoring programme management.

Third, the elements addressed in this phase contribute to a well-structured, organized, and supportive mentoring program. They demonstrate foresight in addressing potential challenges and creating a framework for a calm program operation. Focusing on preparation indicates a thoughtful approach to mentoring program management.

This experience provides valuable outcomes from which we can improve for future program planning and operation, emphasizing the need for adaptability, and strong communication in mentoring program management.

This work is funded by National Funds through the FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of the project Ref. UIDB/05583/2020. Furthermore, we would like to thank the Research Centre in Digital Services (CISeD) and the Instituto Politécnico de Viseu for their support.

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