PEER MENTORING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PROFILING THE COMPETENCIES OF STUDENT MENTORS AT IPLEIRIA

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The Polytechnic University of Leiria (IPLeiria) is a higher education institution with five schools located across three cities in Portugal, strongly committed to providing its students with a high-quality academic experience.Bearing this in mind, through the years there have been developed and implemented a set of institutional projectsand initiatives aimed at promoting student success and well-being for those who choose IPLeiria as their academic institution. Building on that acquired experience, a new initiative was designed, entitled Observatory for Academic Success (OPSA 2.0). This project was submitted for evaluation of a panel of experts under investment RE-C06-I07 | Impulso Mais Digital, Call 05/C06-i07/2023. This call was promoted by the Directorate-General for Higher Education—an agency of the Portuguese public administration, under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, responsible for coordinating and implementing public policies for higher education in Portugal. The proposal was approved, and a programme contract was signed, securing funding for the implementation of OPSA 2.0 during the period 2024–2026.

OPSA 2.0 comprises seven strategic axes, namely: the Mentoring Programme, the Tutoring Programme, the Pedagogical Training and Development Programme, the Special Learning Support Programme, the Academic Success Platform, the Community Engagement Programme, and the Coordination, Communication, Interaction, and Dissemination Programme. Together, these programmesaim to provide the academic community with opportunities for personal and professional development, with the overarching goal of enhancing student success, particularly for first-year students who may lack the necessary skills, resources, or strategies to successfully adapt to the demands of higher education.
This text focuses on the Mentoring Programme, which is designed to promote peer-to-peer support for incoming students, fostering support networks that facilitate academic, social, and emotional inclusion. Following the dissemination of the programme, students of more advanced years (senior students) were invited to volunteer as mentors for the freshman by completing a questionnaire aimed at profiling prospective mentors. This characterization has been instrumental to the programme's success, allowing for appropriate mentor-mentee (seniors-freshman) matching based on shared characteristics, interests, and academic trajectories which fostered meaningful interactions and greater responsiveness to freshmen's specific needs.

The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, thus allowing for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. This article presents the findings related to one of the open-ended questions, which asked: "What characteristics make you an asset to the Mentoring Programme—in other words, how can you contribute to welcoming first-year students?"

The analysis of the 274 responses to the questionnaire revealed a wide range of student profiles, including national and international students, working students, and students living away from home. This diversity represents a major and enriching asset for the OPSA 2.0 Mentoring Programme, as it enhances the programme'shability to address the heterogeneity of the student population entering IPLeiria.
Empathy, communication skills, and the willingness and availability to support peers emerged as the most frequently cited attributes, reflecting a strong commitment among future mentors to creating a welcoming, safe, and supportive environment conducive to the formation of lasting and meaningful connections.

Previous academic experiences in higher education were also regarded as valuable resources for mentoring, as they enable mentors to guide newcomers through similar challenges, sharing practical strategies that have previously proven effective.
Furthermore, familiarity with the institution and the city was seen as a distinguishing advantage, enabling mentors to develop context-sensitive support initiatives, tailored to the socio-cultural specificities of the region where students are expected to live and study for, at least three years.

Overall, the discourse of prospective mentors revealed an altruistic and collaborative stance, with greater emphasis placed on interpersonal competencies and academic experience than on technical or scientific knowledge.

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