

Fostering Student Success through Peer Mentoring: Insights from a Portuguese Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

Peer mentoring has emerged as a powerful strategy for enhancing students' academic and social integration in higher education. At the Polytechnic University of Leiria (IPLeiria), Portugal, the Mentoring Programme forms one of the seven strategic axes of the institutional project "Observatory for Academic Success - OPSA 2.0," designed to promote student well-being and success. This study aims to characterize the competencies and attributes of student mentors who volunteered to support first-year peers. Data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire completed by 274 students from diverse academic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses revealed key traits that mentors perceive as essential for effective peer support, including empathy, communication skills, institutional knowledge, and prior academic experience. Findings highlight the predominance of altruistic and collaborative orientations among prospective mentors, with emphasis on interpersonal and experiential rather than technical competencies. These results underline the relevance of peer mentoring as an inclusive and context-sensitive practice, capable of fostering a deeper sense of (institutional) belonging, engagement, and academic success among students in higher education.

Keywords

Academic integration, higher education, mentor competencies, peer support, student engagement.

