INVESTIGATING THE SOFT SKILLS OF THE INTERNATIONAL MENTEES AT BUDAPEST BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Abstract

Every year, the Faculty of International Management and Business of Budapest Business School attracts more foreign students from all over the world, who participate in face-to-face classes far from home. This year, the faculty has launched a Mentor programme, in the framework of which Hungarian and foreign students of the Faculty of International Management and Business help foreign students to get acquainted with the culture, language and current events of the country and help them to get acquainted with the life and education system of the university. Mentees have applied for the programme, and they will be accompanied by their assigned mentors for several years. This paper presents some of the results of a questionnaire survey conducted with the mentees at the beginning of the programme. The research focuses on the soft skills of the mentees and what skills they believe they must successfully participate as mentees in the programme. Furthermore, the study also highlights the soft skills that the respondents believe they can develop during the programme.

Key words: soft skills, mentor program, mentee, university

JEL Code: Z00, Z13, Z19

Introduction

The mentoring system came to the focus of management research in the last 30 years. During that period, a lot of definitions were born about what a mentoring system and its processes mean. Mentoring is a conventional method of transferring knowledge and ideas from an experienced professional in society to an inexperienced member of the sector (Ahamad, 2022). Out of the different types of mentoring (Situational Mentoring, Developmental and Career Mentoring, Reverse Mentoring, Group-Based Mentoring) we focus on the Peer-Based Mentoring, which is an intentional one-on-one relationship between students or employees at the same or a similar lateral level in the organization that involves a more experienced worker teaching new knowledge and skills and providing encouragement to a less experienced worker

(Eby, 1997). Being a Peer Mentor offers the student the opportunity to gain experience and enhance graduate skills such as leadership, team working, communication and critical thinking skills and planning and organizational skills. The aim of this study is to empirically investigate which soft skills mentees believe they possess, what they would do to develop these skills and whether they believe these skills can be developed at the university.

1   Literature review

In the past 50 years, the importance of internationalization in higher education have been increasing rapidly, which led to the increment of the numbers of international students (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). Besides the challenges that international students may face in an uncharted environment, it is essential to consider that most international students enter higher education and the early adulthood stage simultaneously (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). Early adulthood means having to tackle issues of a social nature that are pertinent to identity and relationships, among others (Quintrell &Westwood, 1994). Thomson and Esses (2016) suggest that the institutions of higher education which promote internationalization, should also be concerned about enhancing the social experience of the international student. One of the ways to optimize the international student social and cultural experiment is pairing them with local peer mentors. To confirm, Hughes and Wisker (1998) reported that introducing a peer mentor into the experience of the international students help improve their cultural and social experience in the unfamiliar environment.

1.1   Mentoring

After visiting many definitions of mentoring, Castanheira (2016) defined mentoring as a process where "a more experienced person (the mentor) gives support to a less experienced person (the mentee) across a wide range of issues relevant to work and professional development" (p. 337). The current study adopts Castanheira's (2016) definition of the roles of the mentor and the mentee, nonetheless, the context of the present investigation is higher education, not work environment. Thomson and Esses (2016) study may serve as a relevant example of a peer-mentorship program in the higher education in which the mentors were experienced students of the host culture whereas the incoming international students played the mentee role. Like previous research (Woods et al., 2013; Gresham & Clayton 2011; Abe et al., 1998), Thomson and Esses (2016) reported favorable effect on the mentees as well as the mentors who participate in such programs.

It is not only the mentor's role that influences the mentoring process as the non-cognitive skills (also known as soft skills) such as the attitude, conduct, and capabilities of the mentee may also impact the mentoring process (Castheira, 2016). Gutman and Schoon (2013) define non-cognitive skills as the "attitudes, behaviours, and strategies that are thought to underpin success in school and at work, such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control. They are usually contrasted with the 'hard skills' of cognitive ability in areas such as literacy and numeracy" (p. 2). Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate the soft skills of international students (i.e., mentees) who joined the peer-mentorship program of a prestigious university in Hungary, Budapest.

1.2 The soft skills of the mentee

Soft skills have always been important, but nowadays they are increasingly becoming vital. Despite the rise of automation and artificial intelligence, the right combination of soft skills is increasingly necessary for success in the workplace.

The European Commission Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content & Technology co-funded the so-called SkillsMatch project. The principal objective of this project is to utilize technology to aid users in developing their soft skills to meet the needs of the European labour market. The outcome of this project provides 36 soft skills, categorized into four groups, namely, self-image and vision of the world; context and performance related; social interaction and methodological, intuitive, and lateral thinking (see Table 1).

Tab. 1: The 36 soft skills as reported by the SkillsMatch project

self-image and vision of the world	context and performance related	social interaction	methodological, intuitive, and lateral thinking
Accountability	Customer focus	Coaching	Conflict resolution
Patience	Diligence	Networking	Creativity
Self-control	Respect privacy	Ethical behaviour	Organisation
Entrepreneurship	Personal development	Negotiation	Decision making
Goal orientation	Positive attitude	Leadership	Manage quality
Motivation	Reliability	Motivate others	Strategic thinking
Self-management	Efficiency	Communication	Problem-solving
Resilience	Respect the environment	Respect for diversity	Critical thinking
Initiative	Adaptability	Teamwork	
Tenacity			

Source: own source, 2022

As the present paper seeks to study the social interaction aspects of the mentees experience in the host environment, it seemed plausible to select and measure the nine soft skills that are

relevant to social interaction (see Table 1). The following table includes a list of these nine skills, along with their definitions as provided by the SkillsMatch project.

Tab. 2: The social interaction soft skills and their definitions

Skill	Definition
Coaching	Guide or teach others by providing relevant knowledge and support. Offer suggestions about the best course of action.
Networking	Keep track of the people in your personal professional network and stay up to date on their activities.
Ethical behaviour	Conduct workplace activities according to accepted principles of right and wrong, including fairness, transparency, and impartiality.
Negotiation	Communicate with others with the intention of reaching a mutual understanding or to resolve a point of difference.
Leadership	Guide and direct others towards a common goal, often in a group or team.
Motivate others	Get to know what drives and stimulates individuals to achieve goals and personal growth.
Communication	Engage with others, face-to-face, in a wide range of situations, using strategies appropriate to context and purpose.
Respect for diversity	Have an active role in promoting social justice and confronting discrimination in the workplace based on cultural identity.
Teamwork	Work confidently within a group with each doing their part in the service of the whole.

Source: SkillsMatch project, 2022

1.3   BBS BEE Mentorship program at Budapest Business School

The need for a mentoring program emerged in the academic year 2016-17, when the first Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) students arrived at the Faculty of Finance and Accounting for a full study program at Budapest Business School. The program is open to all incoming foreign students (Stipendium Hungaricum holders, Erasmus students, self-financed students, etc.). First-year incoming foreign students have the opportunity of becoming mentees, with the more experienced second- and third-year experienced students as mentors.

Our community started to develop due to the growing number of students participating in the English language programs. The movement turned into an official program: BEE Mentorship Program with its organizational form in 2022, two years after its sister program, the Hungarian mentor program started.

In many cases, foreign students come from very distant countries, and it is a difficult experience to be away from home for the first time. The unknown culture of the university brings challenges that students need to adapt to and at the beginning, this new situation could be incredibly challenging. In the case of foreign students, all the new and unfamiliar habits of the culture, as well as the new language of the country, are just some of the challenges they must face.

Peer mentoring programs can begin right from the start when the students step into the institution and arrive at the university. However, our peer mentors connect with the newcomers even before that. The initial onboarding process might be crucial for newcomers, and a peer mentoring program can be an interactive way to enhance the comfort of them.

The most important aim of our international BEE mentor program is to help international students with socialization and integration into everyday life in Hungary and the university. Our mentors contact the mentees before arrival and start to organize the most important things they need to sort out when they arrive. Mentors accompany mentees, if needed, throughout the whole semester, they offer social and professional programs, and give support. By supporting the foreign mentees, we believe that being a mentor can contribute to the students' personal and professional development as they will gain important skills such as teamwork, presentation, communication, leadership, organization, problem-solving, and work ethic. As the working language is English, they could also develop their communication in English and could work in a multicultural environment, as part of a purposeful team.

1.4 Benefits of mentoring

The main findings of Szymańska-Tworek (2022) show that mentors gain professionally primarily through the process of mentoring-being a mentor enhances their capacity for self-reflection and positively impacts their leadership skills, confidence as a teacher, willingness to self-develop, as well as their enthusiasm and commitment to teaching. Mentoring can provide different key benefits for all the participants in the process.

The following table (Table 3) summarizes the main benefits of mentoring from the perspective of the mentee, the mentor, and the organization.

Tab. 3: Peer-mentoring in the BEE Mentor program can provide different key benefits for all the participants

for the **Mentee**	for the **Mentor**	for the **university**
a greater connection to the university and other scholars	get to know new members of the organisation	students gain a more confident understanding of the organisation
increased self-esteem, confidence, and interpersonal skills	reminds them how to listen actively	a more efficient and successful organization
enhanced cultural awareness	being exposed to new perspectives and ideas	better communication within the organisation
a clear picture of their own career and personal goals	encourages him to share his knowledge, which increases his self-worth	shows the outside world that the organisation values its students

helps them to better understand the culture of the organisation and its unspoken rules	strengthening their interpersonal skills	results in a more positive working environment
learns innovative ideas and ways of thinking	greater personal satisfaction	promotes mentors' leadership skills
provides the mentor with networking opportunities	learns how to manage feedback	promotes a sense of cooperation and harmony within the organisation
gains access to novel resources	enhanced cultural awareness	increases students and staff loyalty to the organisation
learns how to manage feedback	learns how to manage feedback	opportunities to develop
opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge	opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge	
learns to speak up and make their voice heard	learns to speak up and make their voice heard	

Source: own table, 2022

2 Research methodology

The questionnaires consisted of behavioral or situational questions. This method uses skill-based questions by giving an example situation where the candidate answers how he/she would react. Situational interview questions ask respondents to explain how they would react to hypothetical questions in the future, while behavioral interview questions ask interviewees to explain how they have dealt with actual situations in their past.

In the current study, the researchers are looking at what soft skills the mentees felt were strong in themselves at the start of the programme, and what soft skills they expected to be stronger in. To identify and select the soft skills, the authors used those belonging to the social interaction and methodological group of the 36 soft skills identified by the Skill Match's project (skillsmatch.eu, 2022). The aim of the Skill Match's project is to develop and demonstrate a European-wide assessment and learning guidance technology that helps users to match their skills to the needs of the labour market, with a focus on supporting non-cognitive skills. The project is also supported by the EU. In this project, 36 key soft skills have been defined and divided into four categories. These were: self-image and vision of the world, context and performance related, social interaction and methodological, intuitive, and lateral thinking. Of these, nine soft skills (coaching, networking, ethical behaviour, negotiation skills, leadership, motivating others, communication, respecting diversity, teamwork skills), which belong to the already mentioned social interaction and methodological group, were used by the authors in the study. They were chosen because they were the most likely to measure changes during the

project start-up and its process. The research was a questionnaire survey, with questions divided into three groups. These groups are presented in Table 4:

Tab.4: Structure of the questionnaire

Specification of the sample	Participants' soft skills and expectations	Evaluating situations
Gender Age Country of origin Work experience Motivations for participation in the programme	Which soft skills is the respondent strong in? Which soft skills do you expect to become stronger during the programme?	Evaluation of the given situations along the soft skills assessed

Source: own table, 2022

The current study involved 69 mentors. The study focuses on the soft skills of the respondents and their development expectations. The methods of analysis were univariate and multivariate tests: such as frequency, mean, standard deviation, ANOVA, independent sample t-test, correlation, and factor analysis using SPSS version 28.

3   Results

The authors begin the presentation of the results by specifying the sample. 36 men and 33 women participated in the study. In terms of origin, 23.2% were European, 52.2% Asian, 17.4% African and 7.2% American. 29% were under 20 years old, 66.7% were between 21 and 30 years old and 4.3% were between 31 and 40 years old. The average age of the sample was 22.41 years.

The survey asked what the main reason for respondents was to apply for the programme. 49.3% of the respondents wanted to meet other people, 60.9% wanted to improve their soft skills, 59.4% wanted to meet people from other cultures, 18.8% had a positive experience with mentoring programmes before. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate their own soft skills, how strong they felt the skill was, and whether they saw the skill being strengthened during the programme. They had to rate the strength and development of the skills on a Likert scale of five. A one meant no and not strong, while a five meant yes and strong. Table five shows the assessment of the skills and expectations for development in the light of the responses:

Tab. 5: How do you rate your soft skills and how do you see them improving during the mentoring programme (average, standard deviation)?

Soft skills	What is your soft skill?		Will your soft skills improve?	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Coaching	3.46	0.815	3.93	0.810
Networking	3.42	0.930	4.29	0.644
Ethical behaviour	4.10	0.860	4.26	0.700
Negotiation skills	3.39	0.895	4.04	0.775
Leadership	3.54	0.933	4.01	0.696
Motivating others	3.87	0.765	4.09	0.722
Communication	3.88	0.796	4.46	0.655
Respecting diversity	4.39	0.712	4.49	0.656
Teamwork skills	4.07	0.810	4.38	0.730

Source: own table, 2022

The table shows that the students surveyed rate their soft skills as strong. They feel strongest in ethical behaviour, acceptance of differences and teamwork. It is interesting to note that in the latter two, among others, they expect to see outstanding improvement, as well as in communication. The researchers looked at gender, age, and the continent from which respondents come, to see if there is a difference between how they rate their skills and how they perceive their development. The Anova test and independent samples T test showed significant differences for some variables. Thus, for gender (t: 1.611 s.s.: .008 $p<0.05$), in the perception of negotiation skills, men perceived themselves as stronger (mean: 3.56) than women (mean: 3.21). In the perception of the development of the same skill, there were significant differences between respondents from different continents (F: 7. 732 df: 3 sig.: 0.003 $p<0.05$). Africans have the highest development expectations (mean: 4.5), Europeans the lowest (mean: 3.56). For further analysis, the authors grouped the skills and their development perceptions into factors. For the skills, one variable did not lend itself to factorisation and that was negotiation skill. The KMO Bartlett test scores were .752, the Approx. Chi-Square: 205.389, df: 28 sig.: 0.000 was adequate. The explained variance ratio was 62.544%. Factors were rotated using Varimax method. For factors formed during the expected evolution, there were no variables that were not included in the factor training. The KMO Bartlett test in this case: .861, the Approx. Chi-Square: 312.099, df: 36 sig.: 0.000, thus good. The explained variance ratio was 67.340%. The rotation of the factors in this case was also done by Varimax method. In Table 6, the authors present the resulting factors, their names and Cronbach's alpha values:

Tab. 6: How do you rate your soft skills and how do you see them improving during the mentoring programme?

Factors	Strength of skills	Component 1	Component 2		Factors	Development of skills	Component 1	Component 2
Leading skills	Leadership	0.818			Leading skills	Coaching	0.818	
	Communication	0.776				Negotiation skills	0.780	
	Motivating others	0.757				Leadership	0.775	
	Negotiation skills	0.738				Motivating others	0.759	
	Coaching	0.705				Ethical behaviour	0.574	
	Cronbach Alpha	0.837				Cronbach Alpha	0.850	
Emotional intelligence	Respecting diversity		0.903		Cooperation and teamwork	Respecting diversity		0,854
	Ethical behaviour		0.767			Networking		0,811
	Teamwork skills		0.549			Communication		0,786
	Cronbach Alpha		0.660			Teamwork skills		0,680
						Cronbach Alpha		0.855

Source: own table, 2022

In both cases, 2-2 factors were developed based on the components. For the strength of the skills: leadership skills and emotional intelligence, while for development: leadership skills, cooperation, and teamwork. The authors examined whether any relationship could be identified between the skill factors and the development factors. Correlational analyses demonstrated that the stronger students perceive their leadership skills to be, the stronger they expect to improve in this skill (r: .345 p=0.004 p<0.05), and the stronger their emotional intelligence, the stronger they believe their collaboration and teamwork skills will improve during the program (r: .565 p=0.000 p<0.001).

Finally, the authors examined whether the previously highlighted core motivations for enrolling students (developing soft skills, meeting other people, meeting students from diverse cultures, previous positive experience in other mentoring programs) were related to the factors developed.

Students who had had previous positive experience in mentoring had stronger emotional intelligence than those who had not (F: 4.653 s.s.: 0.035 p<0.05). During the

program, respondents who agreed on the development of soft skills were unanimous, regardless of whether they had been in a mentoring program before or had been exposed to people from diverse cultures.

4   Conclusion

One of the most significant benefits of peer mentoring is its abilities to bring people of the same interests together and help them develop their professional and social skills. The mentoring experience can be a mutual learning process for all the participants. A successful peer mentor program can be a pathway to improved students' wellbeing and positive outcomes.

Based on our literature analysis, it is widely accepted that soft skills are one of the keys to future performance and success at the university and on labour market as well.

Budapest Business School launched its mentoring programme for foreign students in September this year. From the questionnaires currently being completed regardless of the continent from which the students come; they feel that such a support project is important. Furthermore, it was also clear from the responses that students mostly feel that the programme not only helps them to integrate but can also be a useful tool to develop their soft skills during the programme.

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