

The first experiences of the BEE Mentor Programme at the Faculty of International Management and Business of the Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

The study presents the first experiences and results of the BEE Mentor Program, which started in September 2022 at the Faculty of International Management and Business of Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences with the guidance and support of lecturers from the Department of Languages for International Business. The aim of the programme is to support the integration of foreign students studying at the faculty and to develop their soft skills. The study involves 69 foreign students, and the authors share some simple results of a questionnaire survey carried out at the start of the project. The first findings confirm that students expect a lot from the mentoring programme, especially in terms of developing their soft skills.

Keywords: soft skills, university students, mentoring

Introduction

The need for the programme emerged in 2016/17, when the first Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) students arrived at the Faculty of Finance and Accounting for a full study program. The BEE Mentor Programme is open to all incoming foreign students to become mentees and it welcomes Hungarian and foreign students - who already attend Budapest Business School and are more experienced students - to become mentors for the freshmen.

In many cases, foreign students come from very distant countries and continents, and often this is the first time for them to be away from their families. The unknown culture of the university brings new challenges that they need to solve and manage. The new and unfamiliar habits of the culture, as well as the new language of the country, are just some of the challenges the incoming students must face. In case the incoming foreign students join our programme, they do not have to cope with the arising issues alone.

The BEE Mentor Program is led and supervised by lecturers from the Department of Languages for International Business. There are 3 divisions in the programme. The first division is Administration and Orientation division, of which responsibilities involve the following tasks: organizing and managing the mentor-mentee couples, confirming that students are familiar with the different digital platforms of the university (CooSpace, Moodle, Neptun), helping and guiding them through the login process, taking care of emergency situations or medical needs that students might face during the academic year.

The second division is the Mid-semester Activities division. Mentors in this team are responsible for organizing cultural and social events for the international students and the main aim of this division is to allow students to learn more about the Hungarian culture while socializing with other Hungarian or foreign students at BGE. The mentors in the Mid-semester

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Activities division are in charge of planning, budgeting and organizing events, working in close cooperation with the Marketing division to advertise upcoming events through social media, creating a budget while receiving guidance and support from other mentors and ensuring harmonious and friendly group dynamics.

The third division is the Marketing and Communication Division. This division is responsible for managing all BEE Mentorship social accounts including posting information regarding events, news, and updates, answering incoming questions/messages from the students, and maintaining a fun and open environment where students can share their opinions and ideas about various topics. They are also responsible for adding new students to the group after confirming their programme and faculty.

Literature background / Hypotheses development

The importance of internationalization in higher education has been expeditiously increasing during the last five decades. This caused the quantity of international students to grow (de wit & Altbach, 2020). According to Thomson and Esses (2016), the academic aspect should not solely receive the entire attention of the institutions of higher educational, but also the social experience of the international students. One method that has been proven to enhance the social experience of international students is pairing them with local students who could help them tackle the challenges of moving into a new environment (Hughes & Wisker, 1998).

Among the numerous definitions that have been proposed with respect to mentoring, the present investigation adopts the definition that was put forward by Castanheira (2016). Her definition regards mentoring as a process in which “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” (Castanheira, 2016, p. 337). In 2011, Gresham and Clayton conducted a study in the University of Newcastle in Australia to reveal the impact of participating in peer mentorship programs on international students. Gresham and Clayton (2011) mentioned that their program helped establish strong relationships and connections. Moreover, it assisted international students in understanding the local environment. Furthermore, this program improved the efficiency of the international students in managing their every day life in the host university.

It has been established that the soft skills of not only the mentors but also the mentees play a crucial role in the process of mentoring (Castanheira, 2016). Soft skills are also known as non-cognitive skills. Non-cognitive skills can be defined as the “attitudes, behaviors, 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” (Gutman & Schoon, 2013, p. 2).

In an attempt to employ technology to help the job seekers of the European Union develop their skills to meet the need of the market, The European Commission Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content & Technology co-funded the so-called Skills Match project. This project identified 36 soft skills divided into 4 categories (see Table 1).

Table 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 behavior	Organization

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: Skillsmatch.eu, 2022

The aim of the current study is to investigate the aspect of social interactions. Therefore, the following table (see Table 2) includes the definitions of the nine skills that are listed under the category of social interaction. These skills are coaching, networking, ethical behavior, negotiation, leadership, motivating others, communication, respect for diversity and teamwork.

Table 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 behavior	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.eu, 2022

Methods

In September 2022, the BGE Faculty of International Management and Business launched its BEE Mentor Program. Before the launch of the programme, the researchers forwarded a questionnaire for mentors and mentees. The aim of the survey was to find out what the participants' expectations of the programme were and how the participants' soft skills they

thought would develop during the project. As a next step, the study authors plan to ask the mentors after six months and after one year how the objectives for which they entered the program were fulfilled.

Among other things, the general objective set by the authors of the research phrased was whether the soft skills of the participants in the study would be positively affected by the mentoring programme. In the first part of the research, the authors of the study launched a quantitative survey. A questionnaire designed by the authors was completed by mentors and mentees. The researchers used a self-administered questionnaire and deliberately did not use questionnaires previously used in other researchers' research. The questions in the questionnaire typically consisted of situational questions. This method uses skills-based questions. During the tests, the interviewers present a sample situation, where the candidate responds to it and selects the most appropriate answer for the situation from the possible solutions offered. STAR questions are commonly used in job interviews. STAR (Situation-Task-Action-Result) stands for situation, task, action, and result. The use of this interview strategy is particularly useful when answering competency-based questions.

As mentioned above, in the first step of the study, the researchers looked at what soft skills the mentored students felt strong in themselves at the start of the program, what they wanted to strengthen and what they expected from the program. To identify and select the soft skills, the authors did not use self-listed soft skills, but instead worked with the social interaction and methodological group of skills from the 36 soft skills identified by the Skill Match project (skillsmatch.eu, 2022). In this project, 36 key soft skills have been grouped into four categories by the project organisers. These categories were: self-image and worldview, context and performance-related, peer interaction, and methodological, intuitive and lateral thinking (see Table 1). Of these, in the first study, the researchers analysed nine soft skills (coaching, networking, ethical behaviour, negotiation skills, leadership, motivating others, communication, respect for diversity, teamwork skills), which fell into the social interaction and methodology group. These skills were selected first because they are the easiest way to examine changes in participants over the course of a project year.

The questions in the questionnaire were grouped into three research question categories, which are summarised in Table 3:

Table 3. Specification of the sample

Specification of the sample	Soft skill expectations of	Evaluating situations
Gender Age Nationality Work experience Why they joined the programme	Which soft skills do respondents feel strong in Which soft skills do they think will be strengthened during mentoring?	Evaluating given situations

Source: authors' own research

In the first survey, 69 students responded, but the sample is still being collected because there were students who arrived later for visa and other reasons. The questionnaire was analysed using univariate and multivariate methods: frequency and mean tests, ANOVA, etc. using SPSS

version 28. The present paper presents some results of the research, without claiming completeness.

Results

52.2% of respondents were male and 47.8% female. The average age was 22.4 years. 29% of the respondents were under 20 years old, 66.7% were between 21 and 30 years old and 4.3% were between 31 and 40 years old. By continent, 23.2% were European, 52.2% Asian, 17.4% African and 7.2% American. In terms of work experience, 17.4% have never worked, while 44.9%, for example, have more than one year of work experience.

Around 61% of the respondents wanted to develop their soft skills. This was one of the most common reasons why students chose to join the mentoring programme. The authors looked at the mentors' soft skills related to peer interaction. Here, as mentioned earlier, nine skills were analysed in the light of specific situations. For each soft skill, the authors conceptualized three situations and asked how respondents reacted to these situations. The questions were categorical although in the responses the authors sought to provide answers that would move each situation from complete disinterest to complete cooperation. The following tables show the coaching and networking situations and the frequency of responses.

Table 4. Situations for coaching (%)

Your mentored partner asks you for advice on where to buy special spices (spices from his country)? What do you say?	%
I can't help him because I don't know such places.	2.90
I will tell him to ask his senior fellows about it.	8.70
I am trying to find it out on the internet.	49.30
I offer him to go shopping with him.	29.00
I will post his question in the BEE Mentor FB group.	10.10
You see that your mentored fellow is not well informed about the traffic in Budapest. What do you do?	0%
It is not my business, he'll learn it.	0
I give him a map, he'll find it.	2.90
I show him the GPS and we find the streets on it.	31.90
I download some apps and we try to get to know Budapest together.	44.90
We make several test trips together to make him aware of the difficulties.	20.30
Your mentored fellow has problems using the university's Neptun system to record subjects. What do you do?	%
I don't bother, he will have to learn it himself.	0%
I tell him to go to the student's office where they will show him.	4.30

I give him a description of the Neptun system and if he has any questions, I'll answer them.	30.40
We enter the system together and I watch him explore it.	26.10
Together we log in and I help him take the subjects.	39.10

Source: authors' own research

The responses clearly show that there is still much to be learned from each other and from mentors in the field of coaching. When asked to rate their coaching soft skills on a scale of one to five (one being weak and five being strong), the average was 3.46, i.e., moderately strong, and the majority expected the mentoring programme to strengthen this soft skill.

Table 5. Situations for coaching (%)

One or more mentored peers have not communicated with you for a week or two. What do you do when this happens?	%
I don't bother, it's not my job.	1.4
I don't think I would notice that a mentored partner is not contacting me.	5.8
He'll look for me if he needs me.	31.9
I ask around in the Facebook group to see who knows about him.	13
I'll reach out in person or by phone.	47.8
It is Sunday afternoon. Your mentored partner calls to say he has a toothache. What do you do at this time?	%
I ask him to let me talk to his roommate and we'll figure out how we can help.	17.4
I go to him, so he won't be alone.	5.8
I post on the BEE Mentor FB group for advice.	21.7
I'll tell him to take painkiller.	21.7
I call a dentist on duty and take my mentored partner there.	33.3
Do you follow the academic progress of your closest mentored peer?	%
I don't, it's not my job.	5.8
I'll ask how he's doing.	26.1
We sit down to discuss grades, and I encourage him to study better if he has a lower grade in something.	20.3
We work out effective ways to learn.	29,0
I put him in touch with people who can help if he has a problem, or I teach him.	18.8

Source: authors' own research

The project organisers will also have to improve the cooperation, with an initial average of 3.42 respondents, and in this area the students are very optimistic that they will improve (average: 4.29).

Conclusion

The main of the study was to measure the soft skills of the mentees who participated in the BEE

Mentorship Program. The first results show that students are very open to the programme and mentors are also hard working in helping international students to integrate. It is likely that over time, lasting relationships between the mentors and the mentees would develop throughout their university studies. The researchers aim to repeat the investigation every six months to see how the soft skills of the participants are developing in the mentoring programme. The results of this study may serve as a guide to those who wish to design programmes that aims to develop the soft skills of the mentors in BEE Mentorship Programme or in similar programmes. This might be achieved by identifying the soft skills that need to be developed and focusing on them. The current study concentrated on the context of Budapest Business School. However, it might be interesting to see the results from other universities as this might yield important implications. Therefore, and for further research, similar studies that take different context into considerations are encouraged.

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