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WHAT SOFT SKILLS CAN BE DEVELOPED IN A MENTOR? - THE FIRST EXPERIENCES OF A MENTORING PROGRAMME

Abstract: The study presents the results -focusing on the mentors- of a mentoring programme launched at the Faculty of International Management and Business at Budapest Business School. The basic aim of the programme was to provide a support programme for foreign students, who have recently been enrolled in the faculty as the number of foreign students has increased significantly. The project involved not only mentored students, but also students who volunteered as mentors to help their foreign counterparts integrate. From the start, the authors conducted two surveys, one with the mentored students and one with the mentors. The aim of the survey was to find out what the participants' expectations were at the start of the project. Whose skills will develop, what skills are expected to be developed in the project, what motivational factors play a role in getting someone to participate in such a project. The authors' unhidden aim is to repeat the research every six months and every year to monitor changes. The first studies were quantitative surveys, and the mentors' side of the story is that they believe that the programme can make a positive difference to their soft skills and help them to become better mentors.

Keywords: mentoring, soft skill development, university

1. INTRODUCTION

The BEE Mentor Programme started its operation in September 2022. The program is open to all foreign students who come to study at Budapest Business School and want to become mentees. The present paper discusses the results of a research conducted at the Faculty of International Management and Business of the Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences. The mentors of the incoming students are the more experienced Hungarian and foreign students.

There are 3 divisions in the programme. The first division is Administration and Orientation division. The mentors 'main tasks involve organizing and managing the mentor-mentee couples and helping students with the different digital platforms of the university. The second division is the Mid-semester Activities division, where mentors focus on organizing cultural and social events for the international students with the aim to allow them to learn more about the Hungarian culture. The Marketing and Communication Division is responsible for managing all BEE Mentorship social accounts, posting events, news, answering questions/messages and adding new students to the group.

At present the program has 175 members, out of which 39 are mentors (75% of them are Hungarian mentors, 25% of them are foreign mentors), 6 supporters and 130 mentees. The mentees are from 40 different countries. All the mentees have a delegated mentor. One mentor usually has 2-4 mentees. The mentor-mentee couples were paired after careful research and their common work is supported and guided by the three head-mentos of the divisions. The head-mentors were also selected after a very thorough process and are continuously supported by the leaders of the program. The BEE Mentor Programme of the Faculty of International Management and Business is run and guided by three lecturers of the Department of Languages for International Business.

2. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

It is without doubt that possessing certain skill sets is inevitable for current students, who are the future employees of the labor market. They should have a very thorough knowledge of soft skills. The possession of relevant soft skills is as important if not more important than possessing hard skills when selecting the ideal employee for a given position. On the supply side of the labor market are current university students who wish to prepare themselves for being hired for a good job. In a survey (PWC, 2022), young Hungarian workforce was asked about his preference in work. In line with the findings of Global Talent Trends October 2022 the top four priorities of candidates were compensation and benefits, work and personal life balance, flexible work arrangements and upskilling (opportunities to learn new, highly desired skills). On the other (demand) side of the labor market are employers who are eager to find candidates with strong soft skills. Top skills employers are looking for are dependability, teamwork/collaboration, problem-solving and flexibility according to a survey of 3100 recruiters from eight countries US, Canada, UK, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden and the Netherlands (Monster, 2022). Wiley Education Services recently surveyed over 600 human resources and learning and development professionals and found in their 2021 report, that soft skills which are the hardest to fill now at companies are critical thinking, communication, creativity and analytical skills (Wiley, 2021). Heller and Kessler in their study asked employers, to rate their summer employees on overall quality, and found that communication skills and dependability are the skills which most impress employers (Heller-Kessler, 2022). Soft skills predict success in life so programs that enhance soft skills are important (Heckman et al., 2012). What are soft skills and how can a mentorship program help student to improve their soft skills to meet employers' expectations?

Soft skills are non-technical, personal, and social skills that among others determine a person's ability to fit in, be motivated, be manageable and be creative in a workplace. To be effective at our workplaces, there are further soft skills which are necessary, such as: ability to work in a team, good communication (e.g.: to the point speaking, good presentation, interpretation of non-verbal signals), good organisational skills, flexibility (e.g. openness to new ideas, adaptability to rapidly changing circumstances, willingness to develop), good work capacity, perseverance, love of work, emotional intelligence (e.g. self-awareness, attention, positive attitude), creativity (unique perspectives, new ideas) and ability to think logically. According to Lepeley, human and social challenges cannot be solved only with hard skills (Lepeley, 2021); soft skills are inevitable. Soft skills cannot easily be acquired, they are typically learned over time by individuals as they gain more experience in their jobs as appropriate (Rasli et al., 2020). The McKinsey study (2020) predicts that as automation transforms the skills, companies' need and demand for creativity will rise sharply by 2030 and accordingly different soft skills will be required to be possessed, such as: creativity persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and time management.

Collecting and studying the results of research dealing with the necessity of soft skills on today's labour market, it can clearly be stated that providing soft skills training and courses for university students should be obvious.

According to the OECD's Future of Education and Skills 2030 project, "skills" are defined as the abilities needed or given to conduct a process and to use knowledge responsibly. The OECD Learning Compass distinguishes three diverse groups of these skills:

1. cognitive and metacognitive skills, such as critical thinking, creative planning, 'learning to learn' and self-regulation,
2. social and emotional skills, such as empathy, cooperation, and responsibility
3. practical and physical skills, such as using of ICT tools.

Soft skills can be transferred and developed well within the framework of a mentoring program. The mentoring system is not new in Hungary, it has started to spread rapidly by having more international companies in Hungary and because of this, mentoring practice has become an important part of the system of career development. The establishment of a corporate culture is highly supported, where knowledge is value and where knowledge-transfer is considered important.

A study of Bencsik-Juhász-Kovács in 2014 focused on examining the openness of the respondents regarding their knowledge-sharing and their results showed that the knowledge-sharing willingness was quite average, and the respondents of the questionnaire did not really like the idea to share their practical knowledge with others. They were less interest-centred and expectation-oriented with their friends, acquaintances and with strangers in return of their knowledge-sharing than with acquaintances of formal relationships. (Bencsik-Juhász-Kovács, 2014).

Increasingly Hungarian companies and universities realize the benefits of mentoring practice, which will support the professional and personal development of the futures employees on the labour market. It is important to note that within the frame of the BEE Mentor Programme, great emphasis is put on the process of mentoring the mentors. According to the study of Bakányi, Kováts, Lázár (2008), the concept of mentoring mentors can be defined along 7 dimensions, which are the following: nature of the problem, for who help is important, the values underlying the assistance, the nature of the assistance, the organisational context of the support, the formality of the support, the professionalism of the mentor.

As for the types of mentoring, Byrne (1991) was among the first to group mentoring in three quite simple, but noticeably clear categories. The three types are: traditional mentoring (mentors are people who use their knowledge, power, and status to assist their mentored and assist their careers), professional mentoring (it is established by the proposal of the leader) and formal mentoring (this institutionalized mentoring makes mentoring a standard part of management practice). Globalization and quick technological development helped reversed mentoring be popular.

Harvey et al. (2009) wrote that university graduates have high knowledge of IT studies and web-based technologies, therefore they are willing and very enthusiastic to share their knowledge with others.

Mentoring can have benefits to the mentee, such as getting a clear view about his own career and personal goals, helping him to get a better understanding of the organisation's culture and unspoken rules, providing networking contact, getting access to added resources, getting the opportunity to develop new skills, which will inevitably increase self-confidence and develop interpersonal skills. In the mentoring process, the mentor will also benefit from the common work by facing new challenges, having the opportunity to see the corporation from a distinct perspective, which will encourage him to share his knowledge and consequently his interpersonal skill set will be strengthened as he will be exposed to innovative ideas and methods.

To support intercultural interactions and friendships, many institutions worldwide have developed peer-pairing programs to match international students with domestic students for substantial interaction outside the classroom (Jiali L, 2013).

Peer-to-Peer (P2P) mentoring is a process where two people of similar ages, with similar experience levels work together to help each other grow. The relationship is less formal than a traditional mentoring relationship yet structured so that it's mutually beneficial. Both parties should feel like they are getting something out of it. Mentoring by peers can provide education, recreation, and support, inspire, and motivate them with innovative ideas and help them step out of their comfort zone. Most peer mentors are selected for their sensitivity, self-confidence, social skills, and reliability (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007)

Figure 1 depicts the mentoring life cycle, which shows that after having the mentor-mentee pairs, the most important task is to list the common goals and be engaged in the implementation process together. Communication is a vital issue throughout the whole project, starting from the recruiting process and finishing with the assessment of the tasks.
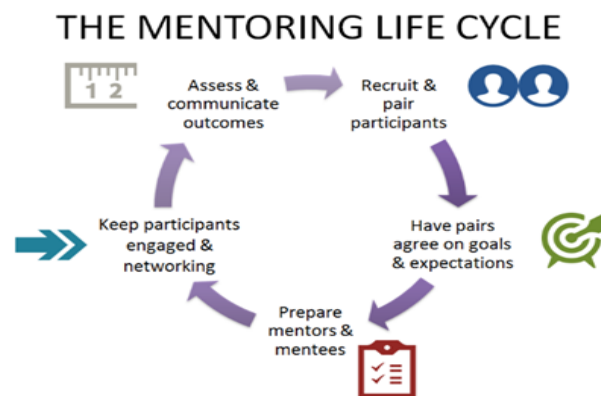
Picture 1: The mentoring cycle
Source: : https://www.apqc.org

Pairing up international and Hungarian students to form a mentor-mentee couple will inevitably have benefits for both and for the university as well. What can be the added value of the P2P Mentor Programme?

1.   As foreign students provide an immense talent pool, they will contribute to the success of the performance and judgement of the university from academic and from cultural aspects as well.

2.   With the help and support of the Hungarian mentors, the foreign mentees will gain a deeper understanding and interpretation of the local culture with its own unwritten rules.

3.   Foreign students are an important source of cultural, educational, social diversity and diversity should be valued as a very precious asset.

4.   Hungarian students would be more exposed to cultural, social etc differences with the presence of foreign students; therefore they will have the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills with creating new networks, which would be beneficial mutually (developing empathy, openness etc. with different intercultural interactions)

5.   The increased awareness of using English and other common foreign languages will lead to the development of international friendships and later it might be an important social, cultural, political, and economic knowledge source for these students when they enter labour market.

6.   Informal and off-campus contacts and relationships (study groups, preparation for exams) between Hungarian and foreign might have significant impact on student learning and personal development and development of their cognitive skills.

7.   Moreover, with increased cultural sensitivities and skills needed to work effectively with people from different backgrounds, domestic students (in our case: Hungarian students) could well have a competitive advantage in the marketplace in an increasingly interconnected, globalized world (Jiali L., 2013).

The simple fact of having international students on campus does not mean that there are going to be a lot more international interactions, it will not automatically lead to developing skills-sets or performing better on international market or having more acquaintances, but with the help and structured support of the mentoring programme, the presence of incoming foreign students can easily be turned into a precious leverage of the university.

3. METHODS

In September 2022, the Faculty of International Management and Business at BBS launched its mentoring programme, of which main goal was to support the foreign students to successfully familiarise themselves with Hungarian cultural characteristics, be it gastronomy, literature, arts, current political situation, geographical features, etc., and to help them to integrate as quickly and successfully as possible into the system of a higher education institution that has one of the largest number of students in Hungary. This means not only learning the administrative rules, but also providing opportunities to get involved in the students' daily life, to learn about educational opportunities, to communicate in different forums, to have direct contact with other students, to catch up on certain skills, etc.

The researchers were involved at the start of the programme and were looking at the expectations and development opportunities of the participants during the research. This paper presents the results of the first quantitative survey. This research was conducted before the launch of the programme and focused specifically on expectations and motivational factors. Who will start the programme, why and with what expectations? Two questionnaire surveys were conducted during this phase of the research. One questionnaire asked the mentees, and another asked the mentors. This paper presents some of the results for the mentors.

In the study, the mentors were selected from upper-year students already studying at the university, who spoke a foreign language well and volunteered to collaborate with a foreign student for several years from the start of their studies. The application for the mentoring role was voluntary, so there was no obligation as a barrier to the mentors. Before the programme started, the mentors met in the summer to get to know each other and the tutors coordinating the programme. At the beginning of September, the authors contacted the mentors by e-mail with the aim of having them fill in the questionnaire they had prepared. 36 mentors applied for the programme, of which 30 completed the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 84%. Respondents were asked to answer the questions on a web-based interface. The researchers used questions of their own design and deliberately did not use questions previously used in other researchers' research.

The questions in the questionnaire consisted of situational questions. The essence of this method is that it uses skill-based questions. Through example situations, the candidate selects the most appropriate answer for the given situation from the given answers. STAR questions are commonly used by professionals in job interviews. STAR stands for situation, task, action, and result. This method is particularly useful for competency-based assessments. The researchers turned to this option because, in the first instance, the authors were interested in what soft skills the mentors felt they had at the start of the programme that they would like to strengthen. To identify and select the soft skills, the authors worked with the social interaction and methodological group of skills from the 36 soft skills identified by the Skill Match project (skillsmatch.eu, 2022). The Skill Match's project aims to develop a European-wide assessment and learning guidance technology to help users match their skills to the needs of the labour market. In this project, 36 key soft skills in four categories are included. These categories are self-image and worldview, context and performance-related, peer interaction, and methodological, intuitive, and lateral thinking. With their questions, the researchers focused on nine soft skills (coaching, networking, ethical behaviour, negotiation skills, leadership, motivating others, communication, respect for diversity, teamwork skills). These skills fall into the social interaction and methodological group. These skills were chosen in the initial phase of the research because they are especially important for a mentor and because changes in these skills can be observed in a brief period.

The structure of the questions in the questionnaire is summarised in the first table:

Table 1: Structure of the questions

Specification of the sample	Soft skill expectations of the participants	Assessment of situations
Gender Age Nationality Work experience Reason for applying for the programme	Which soft skills do respondents feel strong in? Which soft skills do they think will be strengthened during mentoring?	Assessment of given situations

Source: Own table

In the survey, 30 mentors responded, and their responses were evaluated using univariate and multivariate methods: frequency and mean tests, ANOVA, etc. using SPSS version 28. This paper presents some of the results, presenting a simple picture of the mentors' expectations and competences.

4. RESULTS

26.7% of respondents were male and 73.3% were female. By continent, 80% were European, 13.3% Asian, 3.3% African American. The average age was 22.4 years. 46.7% of respondents were under 20 years old and 53.3% were between 21 and 30 years old. In terms of previous work experience, 10.0% had never worked in a job, while nearly 40.00% had been employed for more than a year in some type of job. The survey asked why respondents had applied for the mentoring programme in the first place. Table 2 summarises the responses:

Table 2: Reasons for applying for the programme (N,%)

Reasons	N	%
I wanted to test myself.	11	7.3%
Because of language learning.	15	10.0%
I'm interested in other people; I like to meet people.	27	18.0%
To improve my soft skills.	15	10.0%
I can make contacts.	14	9.3%
I can meet people from other cultures.	22	14.7%
I want to help others.	23	15.3%
I have had positive experiences with mentoring before.	6	4.0%
I have friends in the program, and I wanted to be with them.	6	4.0%
I liked the call about the program.	7	4.7%
Because of the 2 credits.	1	0.7%
Because of the money.	3	2.0%
Other	0	0.0%

Source: Own table

The results of the table show that most people chose the project because of the opportunity to meet other people. Equally popular reasons were the opportunity to gain experience about cultures and to help others. Language practice and development and strengthening soft skills came second in the list of reasons, showing that students were not necessarily motivated by the learning reasons for the project. The least motivating factors were the potential financial support and the credits that could be counted towards their studies. These latter two factors, in the researchers' view, may only be a short-term source of motivation for applicants. It could be said that the soft motivational factors were stronger than the hard factors on this issue.

The authors evaluated and found no differences in the priority of reasons based on age or gender using the Chi-square test. The study also looked at how respondents rated their own soft skills and which skills they expected to change during the programme. For both questions, they were asked to rate the skills and their changes on a five-point scale. A one was not at all strong, while a five was completely strong. The third table summarises the mean and standard deviation values for the skills and their development:

Table 3: What do you think your soft skills are and what do you expect to improve? (average, standard deviation)

Skills	How strong are their soft skills?		How will their soft skills change during the programme?	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Coaching	3.53	0.776	4.27	0.740
Networking	3.37	0.718	4.43	0.679
Ethical behaviour	4.30	0.837	4.37	0.718
Negotiation skills	3.63	0.765	4.13	0.819
Leadership	3.60	0.675	4.27	0.691
Motivating others	3.93	0.828	4.33	0.758
Communication	4.27	0.740	4.73	0.583
Respecting diversity	4.67	0.606	4.67	0.606
Teamwork skills	4.50	0.820	4.73	0.580

Source: Own table

When it comes to teamwork, tolerance and ethical behavior, the respondents think they can rely on these skills with confidence. They rated themselves as relatively weaker in coaching and networking. The low value of the standard deviations indicates that the sample was homogeneous in these respects. In terms of development, participants did not

expect to be stronger for tolerance alone but did for the other skills. Strong improvements are expected for the skills rated as weak. Here again, the authors could expect low standard deviation values, which means that the respondents had similar opinions. The correlation tests show that with the development of coaching, communication (r:.650), tolerance (r:.666) and teamwork (r:.730) will be strengthened. The development of negotiation skills will have a positive effect on leadership (r:605) and the ability to motivate others (r:592). The strengthening of communication will have a positive effect on tolerance(r:812) and teamwork (r:899). The research investigates whether there are differences in perceptions of soft skills by gender, continent, and age. The independent samples T test shows that women and men have different opinions about coaching (t: -1.804 sig.: 0.019 p<0.05), and women felt stronger on this issue (mean:3.68) than men (mean:3.13). There were no differences in perceptions by continent. Respondents did not disagree by age on tolerance (F: 5.686 sig.: 0.24 p<0.05) and motivation of others (8.713 sig.:0.006 p<0.05). In both cases, those younger than 20 years felt stronger (motivation of others mean: 4.36, tolerance mean: 4.93).

The following table and figure try to give some nuance to what is shown in Table 3.

Table 4: Initial and target scores for mentors by skills

Ranking before mentoring	Ranking after mentoring	Skills	Score before mentoring	Score after mentoring	Improvement (after-before)	Improvement % ((before+after)/2)
1	3	Respecting diversity	4.67	4.67	0.00	0
2	1-2	Teamwork skills	4.50	4.73	0.23	5
3	5	Ethical behaviour	4.30	4.37	0.07	2
4	1-2	Communication	4.27	4.73	0.46	10
5	6	Motivating others	3.93	4.33	0.40	10
6	9	Negotiation skills	3.63	4.13	0.50	13
7	7-8	Leadership	3.60	4.27	0.67	17
8	7-8	Coaching	3.53	4.27	0.74	19
9	4	Networking	3.37	4.43	1.06	27
variance			**0.47**	**0.22**		
average			**3.98**	**4.44**		
relative st. deviation			**0.12**	**0.05**		

Source: Own table

We first look at the starting point averages, which are expected to increase from 3.98 to 4.44. In addition to the increase, skills also become more harmonious as the variance of skill scores decreases from 0.47 to 0.22 (and their relative variance decreases from 0.12 to 0.05). The average mentor therefore expects not only to increase his skills in all areas, but also to become more balanced in his skills.

Does the ranking of their skills change? Here we see significant changes (left columns of the table) We see a worsening ranking shift - at least 2 ranking drops - for Respecting diversity (from 1st to 3rd), Ethical behaviour (from 3rd to 5th), Negotiation skills (from 6th to 9th). While we see strong improvements - at least 2 ranks - in Communication (from 4th to 1-2), and Networking. In fact, the average mentor wants to increase his/her power skills: building a stronger network through better communication, while willingly sacrificing those skills that are more for the public good: respecting diversity, ethical behaviour, negotiation skills. In short, the average mentor develops each of these skills to become a more harmonious and powerful individual.

The next question is whether there is a generalizable rule for the process of improvement. We can measure this by dividing the improvement by the average of the before and after skills. This is the last column. Figure 1 shows that overall, the lower the value of the initial skill, the more it improved, but this relationship is not 100%. The negative slope curve [relative improvement=1.06-0.68×ln (before skill)], which shows a trend of 9 points, shows a multiplicity of R^2=0.86.

The above is also supported by the data in Table 5. Networking shows the relational potential of the mentor, this should be developed even if it requires an investment of energy. Mentor, if not contacted by the mentored, 90% of the time actively responds, visits or calls. If the mentor has a toothache, he/she (53.3%) takes him/her to the dentist. If they have learning problems, (36.7%) teach or find someone to teach them themselves.

In brief, mentoring is a win/win situation, while helping the mentee to 1) develop his/her own skills to 2) become a stronger individual, 3) better communicator and networker, 4) improve in all aspects of his/her scores but also have a much more balanced skill vector, 5) reduce (strive to reduce) the relative variance of his/her skills to less than half (from 0.12 to 0.05).
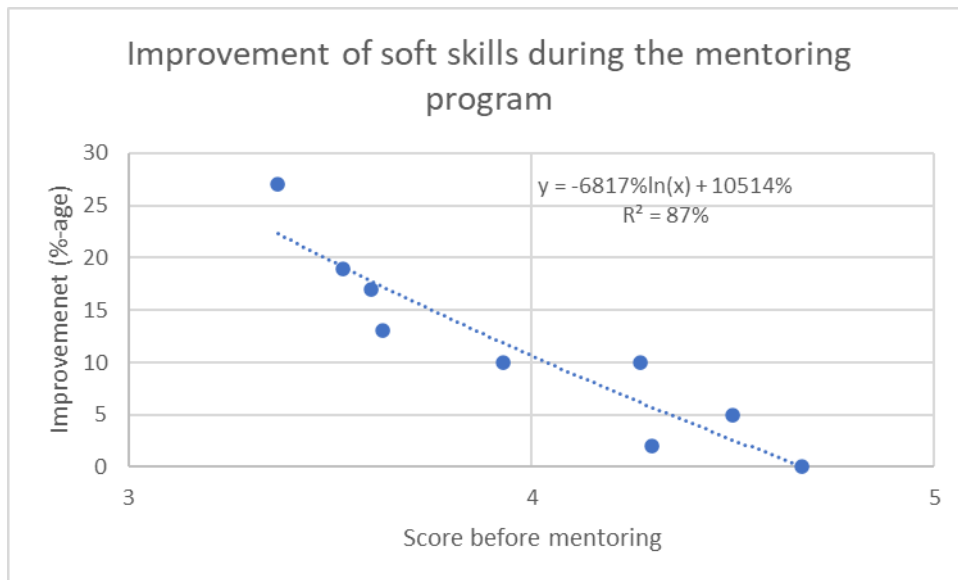
Figure 1: Improvement of skills to the average of before and after
in the order of the before mentoring score of the skills
Source: Own figure

The authors have also formulated different situations in which the importance of certain soft skills has been approached. Table four shows the situations built around two soft skills and the frequency of responses. The two skills were coaching and networking. It is precisely those in which respondents gave themselves weaker ratings that the authors have now chosen for analysis.

Table 5: How do you respond to the given situations? (%)

Situation	Answers	Valid Percent
Coaching: Your mentee asks you for advice on where to buy special spices. What do you say?	I am trying to find it on the internet.	23.3
	I offer him to go shopping with him.	56.7
	I will post his question in the BEE Mentor FB group.	20.0
Coaching: You see that your mentee is not well oriented in Budapest traffic. What do you do?	I will show him the GPS and we'll find two streets on it.	6.7
	Download some apps and let us try to get to know Budapest together.	50.0
	We will do several test trips together to make him aware of the difficulties.	43.3
Coaching: You see that your mentee is having problems using the university's Neptun system and enrolling to courses. What do you do?	I will give him a description of the Neptun system and if he has any questions, I will answer them.	23.3
	We enter the system together and I watch him explore it.	16.7
	We log in together and I help him to take the subjects.	60.0
Networking: One or more of your mentees have not communicated with you for a week or two. What do you do?	He will look for me if he needs me.	6.7
	I ask around in the Facebook group to see who knows about it.	3.3
	I will contact him in person or by phone.	90.0
Networking It is Sunday afternoon. Your mentee calls to say he has a toothache. What do you do?	I will talk to his roommate, and we can figure out how we can help him.	10.0
	I am writing to the BEE Mentor FB group for advice.	23.3
	I will tell him to take painkillers	13.3
	I call a dentist on duty and take my mentored partner there.	53.3
Networking: Do you follow the academic progress of your	I will ask him how he is learning.	20.0

mentee?	We sit down to discuss his grades and I encourage him to study harder if he has a failing grade in something.	16.7
	We develop effective ways to learn.	26.7
	I put him in touch with people who can help him if he has a problem, or I can teach him.	36.7

Source: Own table

In most cases, there are responses that show that mentors are prepared for the tasks and try to help their mentees in the most optimal way. Of course, not everyone is yet sure of the best solution, but in all cases the majority are willing to cooperate strongly.

In the area of coaching, there were some responses where the authors felt that mentors still had some learning to do. This was, for example, the reaction of mentors in managing the Neptun system when they did not learn about the system together with the mentees.

The authors examined whether there were differences by gender, continent, and age in the responses to specific situations. The Chi-square test confirmed that no differences could be identified for these variables.

5. CONCLUSION

This study summarises the first experiences of a mentoring programme.

Several amazing events have been implemented so far for the mentees, such as visiting Ludwig Museum in Budapest. Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art has a selected and dynamically expanding collection. Its collection includes artworks from the sixties until today, some of them are always on display. Furthermore, the mentors and the mentees visited the National Museum in Budapest on 15 March, when the Hungarian mentors detailed what we celebrate on this national day: the Revolution of 1848 and today it symbolizes national independence and democracy. Other great events have also been organized so far, such as board game night, quiz game and a trip to Tata Castle.

The paper shows that the volunteers start the programme with more or less strong soft skills that are necessary to be good mentors, they certainly have expectations for development, and all interviewees believe that their soft skills will change in a positive direction during the project. The researchers have now taken the first steps of their investigations. Their aim is to assess both the mentors and mentees perceive changes in their own skills in the long run. It is the desired aim of the programme that researchers and programme participants expect these skills to develop.

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