Akran Danışmanlığı Yükseköğretimde Tutunma İçin Bir Model Olabilir mi?

Can Peer-Mentoring be a Model for Retention in Higher Education?

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, üniversiteye yeni başlayan öğrencilerin, üniversite rollerini anlamaları ve akademik hedeflerine ulaşmalarına yardımcı olabilmek için akran mentorlüğü süreç ve faydalarını vurgulamaktadır. Bu araştırma, menti ve mentörlerin akran danışmanlığı sürecine yönelik bakış açılarını inceleyerek katılımcıların program ile ilgili beklentilerini, karşılaşılan zorlukları ve programı iyileştirme önerilerini tespit etmeye yönelik bir durum çalışmasıdır. Çalışmada, veri toplamak için bir anket, menti ve mentorlerin tuttuğu günlükler ve odak grup görüşmeleri kullanılmış ve 12 hafta süren akran danışmanlığı programı değerlendirilmiştir. Sonuçlar, mentor ve mentilerin program ile ilgili akademik ve sosyal beklentilere sahip olduğunu, özellikle problem çözme, liderlik ve iletişim gibi becerilerini geliştirmeyi, kampüs yaşamına daha kolay uyum sağlamayı beklediklerini göstermiştir. Karşılaşılan zorluklar açısından, ana temalar, mentor-menti ilişkisine sınır koyma, zaman yönetimi, farklı beklentileri karşılama, bilgi eksikliği ve iletişim sorunlarıyla baş etme olarak belirlenmiştir. Mentor ve mentiler, mentorluk programının etkililiğinin akademik programlardan alınan destek, iyi yapılandırılmış bir mentorlük programı ve program başlamadan önce mentorlere verilen eğitim gibi faktörlerden etkilendiğini belirtmişlerdir. Katılımcılar, bu programın kişisel, mesleki ve akademik beceri ve yetkinliklerine ilişkin farkındalık geliştirdiklerini, bu program sayesinde kampüs yaşamına daha rahat uyum sağladıklarını ve bir network oluşturdukarını vurgulamışlardır. Sonuçların, gelecekteki mentorlük programlarının yapılandırılmasına katkı sağlaması ve yükseköğretimde akran mentorluğunu teşvik etmesi beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akran danışmanlığı, mentorlük programı, üniversitede tutunma, yükseköğretim.

ABSTRACT

Research highlights the benefits of peer mentoring in helping less experienced students understand their university roles and achieve academic goals. The current study aims to explore the perspectives of mentees and mentors, focusing on program expectations, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement. This single-case study investigates a 12-week mentoring program at a foundation university using qualitative surveys, monthly reports, and focus group interviews. The findings suggest that both mentors and mentees have academic and social expectations, encompassing the enhancement of problem-solving, leadership, and communication skills and mentees' adjustment to campus life. As for the challenges encountered, the key themes emerged, establishing boundaries/relationship, time management, meeting diverse needs and expectations and coping with a lack of information/miscommunication. Mentors and mentees reported that the effectiveness of the mentoring program was influenced by factors such as support from academic programs, a well-structured program, and the training provided to the mentors before the program started.

The participants stated that they took advantages of the mentoring program, acquired personal, professional, and academic skills, facilitating a smooth transition to the campus life. The results are expected to inform future mentoring programs and promote peer mentoring in higher education.

Keywords: Peer mentoring, mentoring program, retention, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring in higher education has gained more recognition in recent times because of its positive effects on students. Mentoring can be basically described as both a structured and informal opportunity for two or more individuals to exchange knowledge, expertise, and personal experiences (Weinstein, 2016). There are several different forms of mentoring to facilitate student success such as mentoring by faculty members, by support staff, by alumni, and by peers. No matter what form of the mentoring is, the aim is to guide mentees towards reaching their potential or pre-determined goal. This paper specifically focuses on peer mentoring.

Peer mentoring occurs when individuals who share a similar age or hierarchical status engage in mentoring interactions (Altonji et al., 2019). The growing body of research shows advantages of peer mentoring in higher education since this form of mentoring helps less experienced students better understand the university student role (Palmer et al., 2015) and guides them how to use that knowledge to achieve important goals such as completing their degrees (Collier, 2015). When considering research on factors related to attrition, the significance of peer mentoring becomes increasingly evident. Numerous studies highlight the challenges faced during the first year of university, including the lack of collaboration between administrative and academic staff, ineffective teaching and learning methods, failure to meet student expectations, high workload, and personal factors (Kift et al., 2010; McCoy et al., 2014). These challenges often lead to high dropout rates either midway through the first year or by the end of it (Lassibille & Gomez, 2008; Pont et al., 2008). These research results are in line with Tinto's model of student attrition relating to the constructs of academic and social integration (Jacobi, 1991). Tinto (2013) is known for his research on student retention in higher education, with a particular focus on the influence of effective learning communities on student retention. His social integration and academic success model are widely regarded as one of the most influential frameworks for identifying factors that forecast students' academic success and persistence till graduation. Study findings support the positive impact of mentoring on academic and social integration of first-year students. In their study, Altonji et al. (2019) found that using second-year students as mentors for first-year students was perceived positively by students. This study provided information about student satisfaction with their experience and their perceived advantages from peer mentoring, including academic, non-academic, and social skills. Research by Andreanoff (2016) shows that students perceive mentoring as a positive contributor to their overall satisfaction. DiMaria (2016) highlights that the transition from high school to university can be overwhelming for many first-year students, resulting in a stressful introduction to their new environment. This stress is often linked to challenges such as adapting to new academic structures, meeting classroom expectations, handling uncertainty, and coping with exam pressures. There are many more studies which show that peer mentoring facilitates new students' adjustment to campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ruthkosky & Castano, 2007), increases students' satisfaction with their universities (Ferrari, 2004; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001), and contributes to student success such as average GPA, credits earned, and retention (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). In summary, as suggested by research results, peer mentoring is beneficial for academic and social integration of first-year students to university life (Ertem & Aypay, 2023; Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Ishitani, 2006), and universities should provide first-year students with a meaningful learning environment through mentoring programs (Bansal, 2013).

In general, peer mentoring programs can contribute to potentially challenging transition to university in two ways. Firstly, peer mentors can facilitate adaptation and integration into the new environment, ultimately resulting in improved retention rates. Secondly, peer mentors have the potential to mitigate any

adverse effects that may arise during the transition to higher education (Jenner et al., 2023). In order for peer mentors to achieve their mission to support mentees' social integration and academic success, the mentoring program should have a purpose of guiding and supporting mentees in the areas of academic, social, and emotional development and be carefully designed. In other words, the program's goals, objectives, and desired outcomes should be clear and achieved through developmental relationships between mentors and mentees (Garringer & MacRae, 2008). While designing a peer mentoring program, research suggests that developmental aspect should be highlighted rather than instructive or prescriptive aspect (DuBois et al., 2002). At this point, it could be useful to mention the five Cs framework. The five Cs is a framework emphasizing important areas to develop in a peer-mentoring process for both mentors and mentees (Larson, 2018). The model emphasizes the need to consider the quality of a youth's social interaction with institutions and adult role models. The model includes the concepts of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Each of these components is an important factor regarding how development in a positive climate occurs by highlighting strengths and efficiently utilizing the resources available to them in order to get the most out of what the environment has to offer (Larson, 2018). Competence refers to behaviours in social, academic, cognitive, and vocational areas; confidence refers to positive self-efficacy and self-worth; connection means positive bonds with people; character is related with correct behaviours, morality, and integrity; and caring and compassion represent a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. A peer-mentoring program which is designed on these principles is expected to have a positive impact on personal growth of mentors and mentees (DuBois et al., 2002). In addition to a well-structured mentoring program, it is important to define mentor roles, allocate key resources like staff, technology, time to achieve the program's goals, establish regular communication, build supportive environment, collect feedback from mentors and mentees, teach networking skills, and facilitate socialization (Law et al., 2014).

No matter how well designed the mentoring program, studies report that mentors and mentees encounter some challenges and risks. In their study, Hillier et al. (2018) outlined some of the obstacles encountered by mentors when working with students with disabilities. These challenges included issues with communication, difficulties in establishing a connection, uncertainty about how to support their mentees, and experiencing a tendency to be overly protective. The study by Colvin and Ashman (2010) emphasized the importance of achieving a balance in the mentor-mentee relationship, highlighting the potential risks and challenges such as students becoming overly dependent on their mentors or, conversely, rejecting mentorship, forming intense emotional attachments to students, and later having to disengage at the end of the semester, managing time during the weeks overloaded with projects and exams, or excessive mentor/mentee interference leading to conflicts. In their research, Keller, Perry, and Spencer (2020) raise their concerns for potential risks of mentoring regarding social, psychological and ethical issue such as privacy, cultural differences or dominant culture conceptions, increasing self-control, and internalizing problems in the context of mentoring relationships. Miller et al. (2015) characterize the mentoring process as a "double-edged sword" due to the advantages and potential risks it entails.

As previously discussed above, mentoring is a well-established concept with a rich historical background, and it has been extensively studied in organizational literature over the years. However, the notion of peer mentoring, especially, in higher education, remains relatively uncommon, and research exploring its potential is limited (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Similarly, in Türkiye, despite the evidence of advantages of peer mentoring, there has been little research (Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2012). This study focuses on a peer mentoring program for first-year students at a foundation university in Türkiye. The foundation university previously established a mentoring system, which has been operational for five years. The system involves a mentor pool consisting of around 200 students from the 3rd and 4th grade across all faculties. Each mentor is assigned a group of students based on the annual intake. Their responsibilities include introducing university facilities in the first week, addressing academic and administrative questions related to the department, and maintaining regular contact with their mentees throughout the fall term. The mentor-to-student ratio ranges from a minimum of 8 to a maximum of 20 students. So far over 10000 first grade students have been through mentoring process. However, the feedback collected from mentees and

mentors throughout those years indicated that a more comprehensive and structured mentoring system is needed. Upon this need, a new peer-mentoring structure was developed for the 2022-2023 academic year and implemented in the fall term. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to explore the perspectives of the participant mentees and mentors on expectations about the program, challenges they encountered during the program as well as their suggestions to improve the program. The study addressed the following questions based on the feedback collected from the students to create a more comprehensive and structured mentoring system:

1. What are the expectations of mentees and mentors from the mentoring program?
2. What challenges do mentees and mentors encounter in their engagement with the mentoring program?
3. What factors contribute to the success of mentoring program?
4. What are the benefits that mentors and mentees derive from their participation in the mentoring program.

It is expected that the results of the study will contribute to the field for further mentoring programs and help peer mentoring system become widespread.

METHOD

2.1. Model of the Research

A qualitative case study was used in the study. Case studies involve in-depth exploration of a specific program, event, activity, or process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yıldırım & Şimsek, 2008). As Yin (2014) points out, a case study can centre on an individual, a group of people, a process, a policy, an event, or a role within an organization and delves into the "how" and "why" questions within its real-life context. There are different types of case studies, and the current research was designed as a single-case study, investigating the phenomenon of peer mentoring experiences during a 12-week mentoring program in undergraduate education at a foundation university (see Figure 1). This type of design extends beyond mere description and explanation, aiming to evaluate the phenomenon under investigation. Prior to the study, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participants -30 mentors and 30 mentees-, and the ethical approval from the university.

Figure 1

Case Study

Context: The University

Case: Mentoring Programme
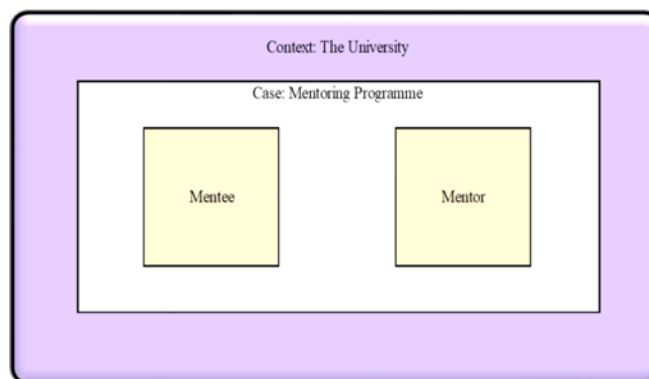
Mentee

Mentor

2.2. Participants

The purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. To ensure purposeful sampling, the willingness and readiness of mentors were taken into account, while for mentees, their English proficiency requirement and at-risk status (low-level English proficiency, lower university entrance scores, disabilities, university choice) were considered. For maximum diversity, various departments (law, business, art, engineering, medicine, communication) were taken into consideration. The study involved the active participation of 30 mentees and 30 mentors. The researcher selected 30 mentors, who were 3rd and 4th grade students, from a mentoring pool of 197 candidates through interviews to assess their willingness and readiness to participate. 30 mentees were selected from the 397, 1st grade freshman group who had passed the English proficiency requirement and entitled to study at their departments. While selecting 30 mentees, special attention was given to their at-risk status. As suggested in the literature on retention, students at risk have more tendency to leave their schools (McCoy et al., 2014). In this study, at-risk students were identified based on low-level English proficiency, lower university entrance scores, disabilities, and those who had chosen the university as their second or third choice and were from outside of Turkey. Faculty variety was also considered while selecting participants. Mentees and mentors were selected from the faculties of Law (6), Engineering (20), Communication (8), Fine Arts and Design (8), Arts and Science (8), Business Administration (6) and Medicine (4). The number of participants from each faculty was determined based on the population of the faculty.

2.3. Data Collection

The data for this study were gathered through a combination of a qualitative survey, monthly reports, and focus group interviews. The initial survey, conducted at the outset of the research, encompassed demographic questions such as department, gender along with open-ended questions. The short survey was developed by the researcher, aligning with relevant literature and research questions, and administered to both mentors and mentees. The short survey included four open-ended questions covering expectations, challenges, skills, and the mentoring process. To ensure the survey's relevance, expert opinion was sought from one faculty member within the education department. Following his valuable feedback, revisions were made to the survey. The mentors and mentees voluntarily submitted their reports on a monthly basis throughout the three-month period. The journals/reports covered the aspects of the mentoring process, reflections on experiences, the contributions of the mentoring to both mentors and mentees, encountered challenges, and strategies employed to overcome them. Assistance was provided in cases when supervision was needed from the mentoring coordinator, psychologist, or academic advisor. Finally, two exit focus group interviews were conducted: one for mentees and one for mentors. During the focus group interviews, the researcher posed questions about their overall experiences, challenges, and risks encountered, as well as the expectations met, and skills gained. The questions asked during the focus group were aligned with the survey questions and the content submitted in journals by mentors and mentees. The researcher took notes during the focus group and recorded the session. The interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes.

2.4. Context

The study took place at a foundation university that operates in English as its medium of instruction. The university has seven faculties, serving approximately 10.000 students and employing 450 faculty members. In line with its mission, the university places a strong emphasis on delivering high-quality education through innovative approaches. Each academic year, the university welcomes an influx of around 1700 new students. Of this cohort, approximately 80% enrol in preparatory school program, while the remaining 20% directly enter their chosen faculties. The university has a mentoring system in place for the last five years. Once new students complete their registration process at the university and the list of these new students is provided to the mentoring unit, they are randomly matched with mentors regarding their departments. There is a pool of mentors from 3rd and 4th grade students who voluntarily serve as mentor for the fall term of the first year. Depending on the volunteer students, the number of mentors vary from 170 to

210, and the number of students for which mentors are responsible for vary from 8 to 15 students each year. Mentors provide social and academic support to their mentees throughout the fall term.

2.5. Research Procedure

To ensure a smooth operation of the current research, the steps below were followed:

1- 30 mentors and 30 mentees were selected as described in the participant's section.
2- Six training sessions with each one lasting 60 minutes were designed for the mentors. Incorporating insights from the relevant literature and guided by the five Cs framework, the mentor training program encompassed various topics. The topics included discussions on the roles, responsibilities, and boundaries of mentors, interactive activities, and role-playing exercises to enhance communication skills, problem-solving techniques, coping strategies, the importance of confidentiality, and an understanding of the academic and administrative structure of the institution. In addition to these sessions, mentors were also assigned tasks that included watching videos on mentoring and communication skills. These training sessions were conducted by experts in the field from the university before the new academic year started. As part of the training, partnerships and resources were also planned. For example, to facilitate the academic and social integration of first-year students, visits were scheduled to the teaching and learning centre, the university psychologist, academic advisors, the dean of students, the library, the student affairs department, student clubs, the unit for disabilities, the career department, and the health services department.
3- Mentors and mentees were paired according to their respective departments.
4- A kick off meeting was held between the researcher, mentors, and mentees. The mentoring program process was shared with the participants.
5- The initial survey including questions about the participants' demographic information and expectations was administered at the end of the kick off meeting.
6- Mentors started a What's app group with their mentors and the mentoring coordinator started another What's app group for all the mentors to stay in touch and to be able to answer any questions by mentors.
7- Mentors and mentees met once/twice a week throughout the fall term for 12-week. After each meeting, both mentors and mentees took notes about the topics/questions discussed and submitted their monthly reports digitally to the researcher.
8- At the end of the fall term, two focus groups were held: one with the mentors and one with the mentees.
9- At the end of the mentoring program, a certificate of completion was given to mentors and mentees.

2.6. Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis was employed to examine the qualitative data gathered from the survey, reports, and the focus group interviews. In descriptive analysis, the aim is to present the data collected through interviews and observations to the reader in a well-organized way. In this study, a framework for data analysis was developed based on the research questions and predefined themes. According to this framework, decisions were made on the categories and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the analysis process, the researcher and the mentoring program coordinator independently examined the data and subsequently collaborated to organize themes based on categories.

2.7. Reliability and Validity of the Study

Ensuring validity and reliability can be challenging while conducting case study research due to the unique nature of such studies (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). To ensure reliability and validity in this study, the data were collected through a survey, monthly reports, and interviews for triangulation purpose; the procedures were documented and standardized to minimize potential sources of bias; the stages were explained for the purpose of assuring the study's reliability and to enable its replication. The researcher

utilized direct quotations to support the findings, categorizing participants as mentors (Mentor 1 to 30) and mentees (Mentee 1 to 30) for a more effective presentation of their insights. The researcher took the responsibility for designing the training program for mentors, supervising the matches to ensure the smooth operation, and overseeing all the process throughout the mentoring program.

2.8. Ethical Approval

Before starting the research, written approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee (decision number: B.30.2. İEÜ.0.05.05-020-317). The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and a written consent was obtained from the students who agreed to participate. It was clarified that the data acquired from the study would be utilized for research purposes, treated with confidentiality, and respondents would not be required to disclose their identity information.

FINDINGS

The current study was conducted to explore the perspectives of the participant mentees and mentors on expectations about the mentoring program, challenges they encountered during the program as well as their suggestions to improve the program. This section, findings, was organized to answer the following research questions.

3.1. What are the expectations of mentees and mentors from the mentoring program?

The survey administered at the beginning of the mentoring program sought to understand participants' expectations for the mentoring process. As shown in Table 1, mentors tend to have higher expectations than mentees, possibly because they have spent a minimum of two years on campus and are more self-aware regarding their academic and social expectations and the skills they need to improve. On the other hand, mentees appear primarily focused on their adjustment to campus life, with little attention to other aspects.

Table 1

Expectations of Mentors

Themes and codes	n (30)	%
Gaining skill sets		
Leadership	19	63
Communication	22	73
Problem-solving	21	70
Planning and organization	9	30
Self-awareness/personal improvement	17	57
Social expectations		
Networking	5	17
Making friends	7	23
Academic expectations		
Raising awareness about the school	8	27
Engagement in departmental activities	6	20
Support for new students		
Adaptation	23	77
Sharing information	27	90

The most striking expectation theme from mentors is gaining skills (see Table 1). It seems that mentors participate in the mentoring program with the expectation of gaining some professional and personal skills such as communication, leadership, and problem solving by creating solutions during challenging situations. They also expect to enhance tolerance, empathy, and open-mindedness while providing support as in the following statements: "*I want to enhance my empathy and communication skills, and more importantly, increase my overall tolerance threshold*" (Mentor 3); "*I want to learn to establish strong communication, take responsibility, and manage*" (Mentor 12). Making new friends and building network are also mentioned as an expected outcome of mentorship program as in the quotations: "*I need to improve my communication skills to make more friends and network for my profession*" (Mentor 19). Academic expectations are another key theme that emerged from the data provided by mentors. It might be interesting to note that although mentors are 3rd and 4th grade students, they expect to gain more knowledge and experience about their departments by taking part in the activities. This could be attributed to their increased awareness of their departments, as they seek to enhance their understanding before graduating, as in this statement: "*I participated in this program to learn better about my department and campus life; last year I served as a mentor, and it helped me a lot*" (Mentor 8). Support for the new students appear to be important as well. Some mentors emphasize the challenges of the transition period and the importance of support, as illustrated in the following quotation: "*My expectation is to remind my mentee that she is not alone and that there is someone she can consult if she has any problems*" (Mentor 23).

As seen in Table 2, expectations of mentees centre around the themes of adaptation, socialization, and information and knowledge. Overall, mentees report various aspects of transitioning into a university and the importance of support, guidance, and socialization during this process. Specifically, information and knowledge, adaptation and assistance appear to be recurring themes. Adaptation and assistance theme includes the need for support in adapting to a new university environment and getting help with challenges: "*I expect to get assistance in areas where I struggle and to have a positive impact during my adjustment to school*" (Mentee 21). Information and knowledge theme include learning about courses, professors, and the institution itself: "*I expect my mentor to help me with course selection and access to sufficient information*" (Mentee 10), "*I hope my mentor helps me with anything I am stuck*" (Mentee 3). Socialization and social opportunities include opportunities for socializing, making friends, and increasing sociability: "*I hope my mentor facilitates my integration with new friends and my adjustment to the university environment*" (Mentee 19).

Table 2

Expectations of Mentees

Themes	n (30)	%
Adaptation and assistance	27	90
Socialization and social opportunities	12	40
Information and knowledge	25	83
Other		
Fun activities/care/motivation	13	43

3.2. What challenges do mentees and mentors encounter in their engagement with the mentoring program?

The analysis of data from mentors' focus group and monthly reports revealed several themes for challenges encountered, including miscommunication, motivation, trust-building, insufficient knowledge/information, establishing boundaries/relationships, time management, and addressing diverse

needs and expectations. Meanwhile, mentees' themes centered around academic and personal issues, as well as knowledge gaps.

Table 3

Challenges Encountered by Mentors

Themes	n (30)	%
(Mis)Communication issues	16	53
Motivating and building trust	11	37
Inadequate knowledge/information	14	47
Setting boundaries/relationship	7	23
Time management	19	63
Meeting different needs/expectations	8	27

Most of the mentors did not encounter significant difficulties during their mentorship process, and they felt well-prepared to address the concerns of their mentees. However, some mentors reported their concerns about miscommunication, motivating their mentees, setting boundaries, managing their times, and meeting individual expectations. It appears that some mentors express concern about being unsure how to communicate with reserved students, fearing possible misunderstandings. This is particularly highlighted when addressing students' questions and concerns, as stated in the quotation: "*It is difficult to talk to somebody who is closed to communication*" (Mentor 19); *"My mentee was shy; honestly it was a bit tiring to communicate with him"* (Mentor 24). During the mentoring program, mentors and mentees stayed in touch mostly using WhatsApp. Mentors added some disadvantages of using WhatsApp as a communication method where responses were either delayed or non-existent, and they had to resort to alternate communication methods or additional follow-ups to ensure effective communication. Motivating and building trust appeared to be another key theme for challenge, especially when mentees may initially be reluctant or reserved: "M*y mentee was anti-social, and I had difficulty approaching and motivating her*" (Mentor 22). Mentors reported that mentees generally sought advice on administrative issues such as course registration, course selection system, program requirements, and attendance system; and academic issues such as faculty and course difficulty as in this remark: "*I received many questions about department professors and classes (Is the teacher strict? Is the class difficult? etc.). These were very subjective and open-ended questions. I tried to avoid answering, but it was quite challenging*". (Mentor 5). Mentors stated their discomfort when they were asked academic related questions. For example, some mentors expressed concerns about not knowing the answers to certain questions and providing inaccurate information as in the following quotation: "*I may not be able to answer all the questions they ask, I understood that there were many things I was not aware of the school, this was an enlightenment in my life*" (Mentor 24). In the focus group meeting with mentors, it was suggested that the university should consider updating its website as it could potentially be misleading: "*I noticed that some information about the school was inadequate or missing, e.g., some information on the website was outdated or incomplete*" (Mentor 9). Setting boundaries appeared to be one of the challenges for mentors since mentees asked some irrelevant questions or asked for demands as illustrated in the quotation: "T*hey call us for everything, my mentee started to be emotionally attached to me, and day and night called me. This became more than guidance or support*" (Mentor 1); *"There is a risk of depending on a person too much; mentors are there to help, not to hold mentees' hands through everything"* (Mentor 4*).* Some mentors reported their discomfort about irrelevant questions and demands as illustrated in the statement: "*My mentee started calling me for any reasons and I found myself trying to do too much for her and even sometimes suffered from anxiety*" (Mentor 1*).* Finally, time management and meeting different needs/expectations emerged as themes for challenges. Time management became an issue especially during the busy project submission and visa/final exam weeks. Although the following statement came from only one mentor in the focus group meeting, it might be important to note the sensitivity of working with disabled mentees: "*My mentee had a physical disability,*

and I struggled with how to behave towards him. It was a delicate process, and I couldn't determine how much assistance I should provide or if I was overdoing it. I found it challenging" (Mentor 6).

The analysis of data from mentees' focus groups and monthly reports revealed personal and academic challenges, as well as knowledge gap issues as seen in Table 4. Overall, mentees seem to be satisfied with the program; however, few ones raised their personal concerns such as social anxiety and lack of confidence as illustrated in the quotation: "*I have difficulty communicating with people, I don't feel confident while talking to people*" (Mentee 23); *"We became friends from a distance. We didn't meet face to face. But this is because of me, I am not a social person"* (Mentee 5). Some mentees had concerns regarding learning speed as reported by one student: "T*here were times I could not acquire knowledge in a timely manner, the flow of information was a bit fast for me*" (Mentee 11). Some mentees mentioned difficulties related to course selection and technical issues (e.g., Learning Management System) but the role of mentors and their ability to provide quick, detailed responses helped in overcoming their challenges. Some mentees reported that they did not get satisfying answers to their academic related questions: "*"When I asked questions about the department, courses, or teachers, my mentor didn't provide very detailed information. My inquiries about which teacher/course I should choose were left unanswered"* (Mentee 25).

Table 4

Challenges Encountered by Mentees

Themes and codes	n (30)	%
Personal issues		
Lack of self-confidence	6	20
Social anxiety	7	23
Lack of communication	6	20
Knowledge gap and learning speed	8	27
Academic issues	13	43

3.3. What factors contributed to the effectiveness of the mentoring program?

The analysis of data from mentors' and mentees' focus groups and monthly reports centers around some common themes: personal features and skill sets, support from the coordinator/departments, good matching of mentors and mentees, immediate feedback/response, and a well-organized mentoring program (see Table 5). In addition to these themes, mentors mentioned the contributions of the training program organized for themselves before the program started. Both mentors and mentees mentioned that their skills and personal characteristics facilitated the program such as communication, problem-solving, adaptability, time management, teamwork, positive attitude, eagerness to self-improvement and learning as in the quotations: *"Being open-minded, tolerant, patient, and friendly helped me build a good relationship with my mentee"* (Mentor 3*); "My leadership and communication skills helped a lot; I am a social person, this helped me build a good relation with my mentor"* (Mentor 12). Mentors often highlighted the significance of being good listeners, empathetic, and creating a supportive atmosphere during the focus group meeting. Several mentors emphasized the value of empathy when dealing with students who have questions or concerns. The mentors reported that they relied on their own experiences and knowledge to help their mentees navigate their university life: "W*hen I first started the university, my mentor was not friendly. Therefore, I am doing what he did not do for me— I do my best to understand her, by putting myself in her shoes"* (Mentor 9). Additionally, mentors' active involvement in school activities and being well-informed about the university's resources and programs helped them support their mentees effectively, "*My participation in many activities at school helps me to be knowledgeable about the school*" (Mentor 25). Additionally, it was reported that the training program offered to the mentors facilitated the process, *"The*

training sessions on problem solving, communication, information about the university were very useful; I was able to answer many questions by the mentees" (Mentor 6); *"Sessions on communication and problem-solving contributed to my development as a mentor"* (Mentor 22). Mentees often emphasized the importance of immediate feedback and responses from their mentors, as reported by one mentee: *"My mentor guided me in every aspect. Whenever I asked him a question, he responded me immediately"* (Mentee 2). Both mentors and mentees emphasized the importance of the mentoring program which was organized in a systematic manner such as defining the objectives, training for mentors, matching mentors and mentees considering their departments and needs, monitoring the program in a timely manner, sharing immediate feedback and responses, providing essential resources.

Table 5

Facilitators to the Success of Mentoring Program

Themes	Mentors		Mentees	
	n (30)	%	n (30)	%
Support from the coordinator/departments	18	60	4	13
Training program for the mentors	23	77	-	-
Personal features/Skill sets	25	83	13	43
Good matching mentors and mentees	22	73	19	63
Immediate feedback/responses	11	37	21	70
Well-structured program	18	60	24	80

3.4. What are the benefits of the mentoring program?

In general, the analysis of data shows that the mentoring program has met the expectations of both mentors and mentees. The participants reported that they gained various benefits from the peer mentoring program, including making new friends, building network, improving personal/academic skills, and acquiring useful information about the university. Mentors expressed personal growth and development through their mentorship experiences since they found personal satisfaction and motivation in sharing their experiences and helping their mentees as in the following statement: *"I not only developed my ability to effectively coach others in their self-development, but also to effectively listen to my partner"* (Mentor 7); *"Being the first to reach someone and having the ability to guide felt empowering"* (Mentor 18); *"As a mentor, I felt like a big brother to my mentee; taking on someone's responsibility matured me"* (Mentor 9). Another key theme found in the data was making friends and developing network among the participants: *"It's been 2 months since school started, and we continue to meet in person; a beautiful friendship has begun between us.my transition to university was smooth thanks to him"* (Mentor 11). Some mentors stated that they got to know each other through training and expanded their social network. Mentees reported that they built a network and found value in this as a positive outcome of the mentorship project since they got more engaged in university activities such as joining student clubs and sports activities and became more involved in campus life. Mentees specifically reported that the mentorship program facilitated their transition to university thanks to mentors' guidance, particularly, using the LMS, information about course selection/teaching approaches, and facilities, *"Thanks to my mentor, my transition to the campus life was easy; I will definitely be a mentor next year"* (Mentee 7).

Table 6

Benefits of the Mentoring Program

Themes	Mentors		Mentees	
	n (30)	%	n (30)	%
Improving personal/academic/professional skills	25	83	19	63
Adjustment to the new environment	15	50	24	80
Network/making friends	19	63	22	73
Involvement in campus life	15	50	21	70
Acquiring new information	13	43	22	73

DISCUSSION

The examination of the first research question aimed to uncover what participants anticipated from the mentoring process. Results indicated that mentors possess higher expectations and greater self-awareness compared to mentees. Furthermore, mentors expected to develop both professional and personal skills, such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving, especially in challenging situations. These findings appear to be consistent with the research results in the field indicating that mentors anticipate enhancing interpersonal skills like empathy, communication, social and emotional support, while also aiming to cultivate resilience and team-oriented abilities (Gunn et al., 2017; Murphy, 2016). On the other hand, mentees focus on adjusting to campus life, displaying limited interest in other dimensions. These findings correspond with other research findings, indicating that peer mentoring assists incoming students in adapting to campus life and enhancing their overall achievements, such as average GPA, earned credits, and retention (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ruthkosky & Castano, 2007; Tenenbaum et al., 2001). Additionally, mentees also anticipated acquiring knowledge about courses, professors, and the institution, while mentors expected to establish networking connections. This expectation aligns with studies indicating that many mentees seek academic-related information and assistance for a smooth transition into university life from their mentors (Conner, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2018).

The second question sought to identify the challenges mentees and mentors encountered during the mentoring program. In general, the findings revealed the main challenges as miscommunication, motivation, trust-building, insufficient knowledge/information, establishing boundaries/relationships, time management, and addressing diverse needs and expectations. Some mentors expressed concerns about miscommunication, motivating their mentees, setting boundaries, managing their time, meeting individual expectations, approaching shy and disabled students, and navigating communication channels. Additionally, mentors mentioned discomfort when asked academic-related questions about professors and courses, as they preferred not to share subjective opinions. These findings align with other studies that emphasize mentoring challenges, such as achieving balance in the mentor-mentee relationship, avoiding over-dependence on mentors, managing time during exam week, and addressing cultural differences (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Hillier et al., 2018; Keller et al., 2020). In terms of challenges faced by mentees, the primary issues identified included social anxiety, lack of confidence, learning speed, and difficulties related to course selection and technical issues. Some mentees also mentioned that they faced challenges related to academic and personal issues, along with knowledge gaps. As noted by Gunn et al. (2017), the challenges most frequently mentioned by mentees are related to academic questions or a lack of academic information/knowledge. This finding is unsurprising, considering that university life is new for them and is filled with uncertainties. The findings of this research seem to align with the results of other studies (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Keller et al., 2020).

The third question aimed to identify the factors contributing to the effectiveness of the mentoring program. The analysis of data from mentors' and mentees' focus groups and monthly reports indicated several common themes, including personal features and skill sets, support from the coordinator/departments, a well-matched pairing of mentors and mentees, immediate feedback/response, and a well-organized mentoring program. In addition, mentors highlighted the impact of the training program organized for them before the program commenced, as well as their active involvement in school activities and being well-informed about the university's resources. Mentees also emphasized the importance of immediate feedback and responses from their mentors as contributing factors to the effectiveness of the program. Finally, both mentors and mentors highlighted the importance of the well-organized and monitored program which had objectives, essential sources, and time management. Keller et al. (2020) and Law et al. (2014) underline the importance of a well-organized mentoring program for a successful mentoring process. The results of this study seem to be consistent with the results in the field (Garringer & MacRae, 2008; Larson, 2018; Law et al., 2014).

The final question aimed to explore the benefits of the mentoring program. The results indicated that participants derived various advantages from the peer mentoring program. Both mentors and mentees formed new friendships, expanded their networks, enhanced personal and academic skills, and gained valuable information about the university. Specifically, mentors improved personal skills and broadened their social networks, while mentees became more engaged in campus life, facilitating a smooth transition to university. These findings align with other results in the field (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study's findings provide strong support for the positive outcomes associated with peer mentoring, benefiting both mentors and mentees. Specifically, the results highlight that peer mentoring programs play an important role in the social integration of incoming students, fostering a sense of belonging and alleviating feelings of isolation as stated in the study by Tinto (2013). Additionally, the results of the study indicate that the mentoring program has contributed to the development of soft skills among mentors, including communication, teamwork, and leadership. The study suggests that peer mentoring initiatives be structured with clearly defined objectives and outcomes, emphasizing the importance of effective mentor-mentee matching and comprehensive mentor preparation. This preparation should involve a training program covering essential soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and time management. Additionally, ethical considerations, including issues of confidentiality, privacy, and avoiding interference, should be integral components of the mentor training process. Based on the results of this study, it can be suggested that peer mentoring approach in higher education can make a significant contribution to "retention" at the university.

For further studies, the following implications can be suggested:

- The impact of the mentoring program on retention could be explored.
- Improving a rubric for the recruitment of mentors, which emphasizes prior experience, personality, and a good understanding of school organization, could enhance the effectiveness of the mentoring program.
- Inclusive mentoring programs could be designed to address the diverse needs of the student population, including considerations for international students, students from underrepresented groups, and those facing unique challenges.
- Mentor training programs tailored to the needs of incoming students could be designed, developed, and shared to disseminate best practices in higher education.
- For sustainability, institutions could implement mechanisms for the continuous evaluation of peer mentoring programs to assess their impact and identify areas for improvement. Regular feedback from participants can inform necessary adjustments and enhancements.

- Integrating peer mentoring initiatives into the formal curriculum could be recognized as a valuable component of student development.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Giriş

Yükseköğretimde mentorluk, öğrenciler üzerindeki olumlu etkileri nedeniyle son zamanlarda sıklıkla tartışılan bir kavram olmaktadır. Mentorluk, kısaca temelde iki veya daha fazla bireyin bilgi, uzmanlık ve kişisel deneyimlerini paylaşması ve birbirini desteklemesi olarak tanımlanabilir (Weinstein, 2016). Alan yazında farklı mentorluk türlerinden bahsedilmektedir: öğretim üyeleri tarafından, destek personeli tarafından, mezunlar tarafından ve akranlar tarafından yapılan mentorlukler gibi. Bu makale özellikle akran mentorluğuna odaklanmaktadır. Akran mentorluğu, benzer yaşa sahip bireylerin mentorluk etkileşimlerine girdiği bir durumu ifade eder (Altonji vd., 2019). Özellikle yükseköğretimde akran mentorluğu konusunda yapılan çalışmalar, üniversitenin ilk yılında karşılaşılan zorlukların üstesinden gelinmesi ve üniversiteye uyum sağlama konusunda olumlu etkileri olduğunu göstermektedir (Palmer vd., 2015). Araştırmalar, akran mentorluğunun yeni öğrencilerin kampüs ortamına uyumlarını kolaylaştırdığını (Pascarella ve Terenzini,

2005; Ruthkosky ve Castano, 2007), öğrencilerin üniversitelerinden memnuniyetini artırdığını (Ferrari, 2004; Tenenbaum, Crosby ve Gliner, 2001) ve öğrenci başarısına katkı sağladığını göstermektedir (Campbell ve Campbell, 2007; Colvin ve Ashman, 2010). Akran danışmanlığının olumlu katkılarına rağmen bu kavramın yükseköğretimde gerektiği gibi kullanılmadığı ve yaygın olmadığı görülmektedir (Crisp ve Cruz, 2009). Benzer şekilde, Türkiye'de bu konuda az araştırma yapılmıştır (Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2012). Bu çalışmanın amacı Türkiye'deki bir vakıf üniversitesine yeni başlayan birinci sınıf öğrencileri için uygulamaya konulan mentorlük programını değerlendirmek ve bu çalışma sonuçlarının akran mentorluk sisteminin yaygınlaştırmasına katkı sağlamaktır.

Çalışmada şu sorular ele alınmıştır:

1. Menti ve mentorlerin mentorluk programıyla ilgili beklentileri nelerdir?
2. Menti ve mentorler, mentorluk programı süresince hangi zorluklarla karşılaşırlar?
3. Mentorluk programının başarılı bir şekilde yürütülmesine katkı sağlayan faktörler nelerdir?
4. Menti ve mentorler, mentorluk programından hangi faydaları elde ederler?

Yöntem

Bu araştırmada tek bir nitel durum çalışması kullanılmıştır. Durum çalışmaları belirli bir programın, etkinliğin veya sürecin derinlemesine incelenmesini içerir (Creswell ve Poth, 2018; Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2008). Yin (2014) tarafından belirtildiği gibi, bir durum çalışması birey, bir grup insan, bir süreç, bir politika, bir olay veya bir organizasyon içindeki bir rol üzerine odaklanabilir ve gerçek yaşam bağlamında "nasıl" ve "neden" sorularını derinlemesine inceler. Bu çalışmada geçerlilik ve güvenirliliği sağlamak için veriler anket, aylık rapor ve görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanmış; çalışmanın güvenirliliğini ve yeniden üretilebilirliğini sağlamak amacıyla tüm basamaklar detaylı bir şekilde açıklanmış ve veriler araştırmacı ve mentor koordinatör tarafından gruplanmıştır. Çalışma öncesinde araştırmacı, katılımcılardan onam formunu ve üniversiteden etik onay almıştır. Çalışmada katılımcıları seçmek için amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmış, menti grubu katılımcıları özellikle düşük düzeyde İngilizce yeterliliği olan, üniversite giriş puanları düşük, engellilik durumu olan ve Türkiye dışından gelip üniversiteyi ikinci veya üçüncü tercih eden öğrenci grubundan seçilmiştir. Mentor grubu öğrenci mentor havuzu içinden farklı bölümlerden gönüllü öğrenci grubu arasından belirlenmiştir. Bu çalışma için veriler, bir anket, aylık sunulan raporlar ve odak grup görüşmeleri ile toplanmıştır. Veri analizi, araştırmacı ve mentör koordinatörü tarafından araştırma sorularında belirtilen temalara göre yapılmıştır. Analizin geçerliliği için araştırmacı, anket ve aylık raporlardan çıkarılan temaları odak grup çalışmalarından toplanan verilerle karşılaştırmış, bulguları desteklemek için direkt alıntılar kullanmıştır.

Bulgular

1- Mentee ve mentörlerin mentorluk programından beklentileri nelerdir?

Mentörluk programının başında uygulanan anket, mentor ve mentilerin program ile ilgili akademik ve sosyal beklentilere sahip olduğunu, özellikle problem çözme, liderlik ve iletişim gibi becerilerini geliştirmeyi, kampüs yaşamına daha kolay uyum sağlamayı beklediklerini göstermiştir göstermiştir. Sonuçlar diğer araştırma sonuçlarıyla tutarlı görünmektedir. Alan çalışmaları akran danışmanlığının yeni öğrencilerin kampüse uyum sağlamasına, akademik başarılarını arttırmalarına ve üniversitede tutunmalarına katkı sağladığını göstermektedir (Campbell ve Campbell, 2007; Colvin ve Ashman, 2010; Pascarella ve Terenzini, 2005; Ruthkosky ve Castano, 2007; Tenenbaum vd., 2001).

2- Menti ve mentörlerin mentörlük programında karşılaştıkları zorluklar nelerdir?

Mentör ve mentilerin odak grup ve aylık raporlardan elde edilen veri analizleri, karşılaşılan genel zorlukların iletişim, motivasyon, güven oluşturma, yetersiz bilgi/yanlış bilgi, ilişki sınırlarının korunamaması, zaman yönetimi ve farklı beklentilerin karşılanması olduğunu göstermiştir. Mentörlar, içe dönük veya farklı iletişim tarzlarına sahip mentilerle nasıl iletişim kuracaklarını bilemediklerini, kendilerine

iletilen soruları eksik/yanlış yanıtlamaktan çekindiklerini, bölüm dersleri ve profösörler ile ilgili soruları nasıl yanıtlayacaklarını bilemediklerini, yanlış anlaşılmaktan ve kişisel algılarını paylaşmaktan korktuklarını ve bunun iletişimlerini engellediğini belirtmişlerdir. Bazı mentorlar üniversite ile bilgilerin güncel olmadığını (web sitesi gibi), eksik veya yanıltıcı olduğunu belirmişlerdir. Bazı mentörler, mentilerinin sıklıkla kendilerini aradığını ve program ile alakası olmayan pek çok soru sorduklarını ve bu sürecin rehberlik veya destekten daha fazlasına dönüştünü ve rahatsız edici olduğunu vurgulamışlardır. Genel olarak, mentiler programdan memnun olduklarını ancak kendi kişisel özelliklerinden kaynaklanan (sosyal anksiyete, içe kapanık vb.) sıkıntılar nedeniyle zorluk yaşadıklarını belrtmişlerdir. Bu araştırmanın sonuçları, alan yazındaki çalışmalarla tutarlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Alan çalışmalarında da mentör ve mentilerin benzer zorluklarla karşılaştıkları vurgulanmıştır (Colvin ve Ashman, 2010; Keller vd., 2020).

3- Mentörluk programının etkinliğine hangi faktörler katkıda bulundu?

Mentör ve mentilerin odak grupları ve aylık raporlardan elde edilen bulgular, mentör programının etkili olmasında katılımcı kişisel özellik ve beceri setlerinin, koordinatör/ akademik bölüm desteğinin, mentör ve menti eşleşmesinin, anlık geri bildirimlerin ve iyi organize edilmiş bir mentorluk programının önemli olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu bulguların yanı sıra, mentörlar, programın başlamadan önce kendileri için düzenlenen eğitim programının da oldukça önemli olduğunu belirtmişlerdir. Hem mentör hem de mentiler iletişim, problem çözme, adaptasyon, zaman yönetimi, takım çalışması, olumlu tutum, özgüven ve öğrenmeye açık olmak gibi beceri ve kişisel özelliklerin programı kolaylaştırdığını ifade etmişlerdir. Ayrıca, mentörların önceki yıllarda okul etkinliklerine aktif katılımı, üniversitenin imkanları ve kaynakları hakkında iyi bilgi sahibi olmalarının, mentilerini yönlendirmeleri ve desteklemelerinde katkısı olduğu da belirtilmiştir. Garringer ve MacRae (2008), Larson (2018) ve Law ve diğerleri de (2014) benzer faktörlerin mentor programlarında önemli olduğunu söylemişlerdir.

4- Mentörlük programın katılımcılara faydaları nelerdir?

Genel olarak, rehberlik programının hem mentör hem de mentilerin beklentilerini karşıladığını göstermektedir. Katılımcılar, akran rehberlik programından yeni arkadaşlıklar kurma, kişisel becerilerini geliştirme, üniversite hakkında faydalı bilgiler edinme gibi çeşitli faydalar elde ettiklerini belirtmişlerdir. Özellikle mentörler, akran danışmanlığı sürecinin sorumluluk almaları, empati kurmaları, sabırlı davranmaları gibi nedeniyle kişisel olgunlaşmalarına ve gelişimlerine katkı sağladığını; bunun da kendilerini motive ettiğini ifade etmişlerdir. Mentiler de bu programın, kişisel, mesleki ve akademik beceri ve yetkinlikleri ile ilgili farkındalık geliştirdiklerini, bu program sayesinde kampüs yaşamına daha rahat uyum sağladıklarını ve iyi bir network oluşturdukarını vurgulamışlardır.

Sonuç

Bu çalışmanın bulguları, alan yazında belirtilen akran danışmanlığına ilişkin olumlu sonuçları güçlü bir şekilde desteklemektedir. Çalışma, akran danışmanlığı programının yeni gelen öğrencilerin sosyal entegrasyonunda kilit bir rol oynayarak aidiyet duygusu yarattığını, izolasyon hissini hafiflettiğini ve mentörlerin ise iletişim, takım çalışması ve liderlik gibi becerilerinin gelişimine katkıda bulunduğunu göstermektedir. İleride bu alanda yapılacaklar çalışmalar için:

- Akran danışmanlığının üniversitede tutunma üzerine etkisinin araştırılması,
- Mentörlerin seçiminde ölçüt geliştirme çalışmalarının yapılması,
- Kapsayıcı akran danışmanlığı programlarının geliştirilmesi,
- İyi örnek akran danışmanlığı programlarının paylaşılarak yükseköğretimde en iyi uygulamaların yayılması,
- Akran danışmanlığı programlarının müfredata entegre edilerek kurum kültürü geliştirilmesi, önerilebilir.