MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLE

Positive Shifts in Adult Education: The Role of Student Mentoring in a Vocational College in Malta

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Introduction

The study analyses the newly introduced role of student mentors in the career advisory service at MCAST, the main vocational education and training institution in Malta. In view of the high rate of early leavers from education and training (ELET), the student mentor's role was implemented with the aim of improving student retention rates as well as to enrich their learning journey. Therefore, this study aims to examine how the new student mentoring programme is working from the perspective of management and professionals. Multiple perceptions about this programme were investigated by nine stakeholders through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with the student mentors, career advisors, counsellors and their respective directors. Data were analysed through Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three main themes were generated reflecting the impact of student mentors at MCAST and the dynamics between professionals, as follows: Reinstated Multidisciplinary Team Meetings, Increase in Referrals and Better Student Relationships. Findings indicate that the mentoring programme was positively accepted by the participants for the various benefits it brought to the overall service delivery.

Rationale

A number of students are always at risk of falling through the cracks of the Maltese Educational System as students fail to pass their examinations and/or stop attending school altogether, and normally decide to seek employment rather than completing compulsory or postsecondary education and training. In 2019, Malta, with 16.7%, had the second-highest rate of Early Leavers from Education and Training (ELET) within the European Union (Eurostat, 2021). According to the Maltese definition, ELET refers to "persons between 18 and 24 years of age who do not have at least the equivalent of Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) passes (grades 1 to 7) in five different subjects and who are not in education or training." (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, p.7). This is further compounded by the fact that compulsory education in Malta stops at age 16 and therefore for the purposes of this article, individuals become adults at the age of 16 and follow foundation courses at the MCAST having failed to attain any SEC passes. A wide variety of factors contribute to this high percentage as well as dropouts ranging from compulsory education, post-secondary and tertiary education affect the above cited percentage. The Maltese education system has been putting a lot of resources in place to combat ELET and to meet the European Commission's (EC) 2030 target of no more than 9% of the population falling into the ELET bracket (Eurostat, 2023).

Research on ELET has mainly focused on dissecting and understanding the problem (Haug & Plant, 2015; Cedefop, 2016); on how it impacts society and the economy (Flisi et al., 2015); on establishing tools and policies that cater for ELET (NCFHE, 2014; Haug & Plant, 2015, Cedefop, 2016); on patterns and reasons why students dropout and the contributing factors (Bugeja & Cauchi, 2012; Spiteri, 2012; Camilleri, 2016). Yet, in the local context, little or no research has been carried out to analyse initiatives or programmes that seek to combat ELET within post-secondary institutions. Consequently, this study attempted to address this gap in research, as this qualitative study analysed the newly introduced at-risk mentoring programme at a post-secondary vocational college in Malta called the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). Therefore the focus will be specifically on ELVET students, i.e. potential at-risk leavers from vocational education and training.

The main goals of the mentoring program at MCAST are to improve students' retention rates and to enrich students' educational experience. In fact, one of

the reasons the mentoring programme was set-up was to address the seemingly high dropout rates at MCAST (Farrugia, 2019). During MCAST academic year 2018/19 (first year of mentors when this study was being conducted), between the months of November and April, 16% of the total 1,973 foundation level population dropped out (Meeting with MCAST Registrar, 19th August 2019). Therefore, twenty-three student mentors were assigned with foundation level students and were distributed amongst each institute within the vocational college with the aim of supporting students in furthering their studies. Furthermore, student mentors were appointed to act as an intermediary role that filters and refers students to both career advisors and therapists, as well as other departments at MCAST which were not included in the purpose of this study.

Review:

Haug and Plant (2015) refer to ELET as a 'wicked problem' (Rittel & Webber, 1973 in Haug & Plant, 2015) because of the many issues it provokes and the awareness that no solution can ever eradicate this problem completely. The ramifications of this 'wicked problem' ranges from negatively impacting the economy, society, the individual's quality of life, and one's well-being (MEDE 2014; NCHFE 2014; Haug & Plant, 2015; The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, 2015). The crux of the issue is that ELET do not have the basic skills required to enter the labour market at entry point (Villalba, 2014). This puts ELET in a position where it is difficult to find employment, and if they are employed it would be a series of patchy work which most of the times yields a low salary (Haug & Plant, 2014; European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice & Cedefop, 2014, p. 3). Subsequently, such working status might lead to a higher risk in engaging in delinquency, setting unsustainable long-term goals, less control over one's life and time, less resources to participate in social life and to provide to a potential family one would want to create (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice & Cedefop, 2014, p. 3; The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, 2015). All the issues mentioned have a great impact on one's life and self-worth, it can also lead to isolation and social exclusion (The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, 2015).

The 2011 European Commission recommends the member states to strategically plan policies to reduce ELET that target the root causes of ELET

within all of the education sector, in ways that are sustainable. Furthermore, it is pivotal that comprehensive policies are adopted as part of a three-fold strategy including prevention, intervention and compensation (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice & Cedefop, 2014; Oomen & Plant, 2014, Cedefop, V.II, 2016). The main participants of this study, i.e. the career advisors, therapists (represented by a counsellor), and student mentors form part of an intervention measure to combat ELVET (EC, 2013, p. 5).

At the intervention stage, it is crucial that professionals identify signs and issues which students demonstrate, for instance, higher rates of absenteeism. The idea is that the intervention takes place as early as possible in order to identify the problem, to rope in all stakeholders involved and to support the students from disengaging through student-centric measures (Oomen & Plant, 2014; Cedefop, V.II, 2016). Through the addition of student mentors, MCAST has set up an early warning system in order to preempt and cater for potential ELVET. Student mentors then refer to the other professionals as needed. All the practitioners' roles are intertwined in a way that each profession's work complements the other so that all together they cover the different aspects of at-risk students' needs.

It is critical for adult learners to have a protective and caring adult that is consistently present in their lives (Masten & Reed, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2002; Hurd et al., 2010). Such adults who lack constant figures in their lives, could benefit from other appropriate role models and healthier relationships outside the home, such as the support provided via mentoring programmes (DuBois & Neville, 1997; DuBois et al., 2002; Keating, Tomishima, Foster & Alessandri, 2002; Rhodes & DuBois 2006; Satchwell, 2006; Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller & Rhodes, 2009). Research indicates that generally vulnerable or at-risk adults are the ones who seem to benefit the most from mentoring programs as it helps them to become agentic and self-motivated about their future aspirations (Kashani, Reid & Rosenberg, 1989; Raposa et al., 2019; Jekielek et al., 2002). In this study mentoring is referring to a "one-to-one relationship between a [student of adult age] and [another] caring adult who assists the [student] in meeting academic, social, career, or personal goals" (Nettles, 1991, p. 139, in DuBois & Neville, 1997).

Theoretical Framework

This research adopted two main frameworks that serve as its theoretical backbone. Patton and McMahon's (2014) Systems Theory Framework (STF) is used to examine how the mentoring program is perceived by the mentors themselves as well as the other teams within the student support services that are involved in this study; and to gain insight into the internal dynamics between professionals and their respective directors. STF represents a dynamic and complex system of the interaction between the individual, his/her societal systems, and the environmental-societal system within a fluid timeframe (Patton & McMahon, 2014; McMahon & Patton, 2018). Therefore STF looks at the inseparable connection within and between parts of the whole (including content and process as an integrated unit) by means of a recursive dynamic, changes over time and chance.

Ryan and Deci's (2017) Self-determination theory (SDT) is adopted to explore how the mentors' relationship helps students develop their inner resources from the mentors' perspective. Self-determination refers to the individual's ability to have control over one's life choices. SDT suggests that people are motivated to grow and shift to become self-determined when the following three basic and universal needs, which is when competence, connection and autonomy, are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, SDT is an organismic theory of personality and human behaviour development in terms of evolved inner resources and self-regulation. This theory explores the biological, social and cultural factors that could either facilitate or hinder the human's capability to grow, commit and to take care of one's own mental health (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Methodology

This study is concerned with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach because it reflects human experience and the interpretation of such moments in an individual's life. An interpretivist approach was adopted for this research because the aim was to gain insight related to internal dynamics between professionals who help students within the MCAST system. In fact, an interpretative approach is best suited to explore hidden agendas and complex multifaceted social dynamics.

The main focus of the study is that of eliciting how the mentoring programme was perceived by the mentors, the other professionals, and the management of the college who were directors of the mentors and of the respective professionals working closely with the mentors. Multiple perceptions about the at-risk mentoring program were investigated via interviews with nine stakeholders including 3 student mentors (SMA, SMB, and SMC), 2 career advisors (CAA and CAB), 1 counsellor (C), and their respective directors (DP and DOE). Data source triangulation was used to substantiate evidence and shed light on the phenomenon under inquiry (Creswell, 1998; Rogers, 2012). The recruitment ratio of the participants was influenced by the fact that there are only two career advisors within the vocational college, so the student mentors had to be chosen relatively in proportion. Thus, three student mentors were randomly chosen from a pool of twenty three mentors. Conversely, since career guidance is the main discipline around which this study is centred, only one counsellor was chosen as a means to have the insight of the full complement of professionals at MCAST.

The research was carried out between 2019 and 2020 when the mentoring program had already been running for a whole academic year within the vocational institution. The interviews were audio-recorded, in-depth, individual, and semi-structured. Data was transcribed and analysed through Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were elicited and then carefully examined to generate a thematic map in order to organise and navigate the data. Moreover, the authors made sure that the emergent themes were discussed and grounded within the literature review, the epistemological lens and the theories employed.

Findings: Creating a Positive Shift in Service through Mentoring

This article focuses on the perceived 'Positive Shift in Service'. The participants concurred that the student mentors benefitted the student services provision as they helped to reinstate multidisciplinary team meetings, increased the number of referrals, and promoted better student relationships.

The participants perceived the new role of student mentors as an added value to the holistic provision of student support services. MCAST has established a tier of frontliners with the mentors, with the aim to prevent or to retain potential at-risk students as early as possible, as they focus on getting to know

all the students individually, to filter, and refer them to the professionals as needed. Therefore, student mentors are filling the gaps by providing continuation, stability and bringing the students closer to the student support services:

Student mentors are contributing immensely. The change has been sudden and positive. […] when the mentors came in, they brought familiarity, they brought a sense of certitude of service. So, you will always be followed. People never feel alone. (CAB)

A number of students have said, "thank God for the mentor. If the mentor were not there I probably would have stopped". To me even if a handful of students were saved, it's worth it and it's not just a handful. The student mentors have managed to make the student feel more valued, more esteemed, more empowered, and more in control. That to me has worked wonders, because a student has left here now, not only with a qualification but with a stronger character. (DP)

A mentor who cares, protects and proves to be a steady presence is key to building a meaningful connection wherein the mentee feels seen, supported and secure to resort to his/her mentor (Hurd et al., 2010; Masten & Reed, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2002). Therefore, this role seems to have brought a positive impact not only to the respective directors and professionals themselves, but also to the students who in their opinion needed a sense of security.

Reinstated Multidisciplinary Team Meetings

Although the career advisors, student mentors and the counsellor all work under the student support services directorate, they also report to different departments and directors. With the addition of the role of student mentors, a common platform was needed in order for practitioners to discuss complex at-risk students' that needed different interventions from multiple practitioners. Therefore, the directors felt the need to establish monthly multi-disciplinary team meetings. In this way, students are seen holistically, interventions are timed in a continuum, and practitioners can avoid duplication of work. Unfortunately, as the DOE elucidates below, before the multidisciplinary meetings were established, students were slipping away from MCAST's support system as teams were previously working in silos:

[...] we recently started to have these meetings with student mentors, student support service coordinators, LSU Lecturers, student liaison officers and career advisors to discuss cases. Because what was happening before is students used to say yes, I am going to counselling and then the other services would say there is nothing they can do, he is being followed by the counsellors. And in reality, it could have been he went once for counselling and he didn't continue with the counselling sessions and students were slipping out of the services that we offered due to fragmentation of services. (DOE)

Mentoring refers to, "an alliance that creates a space for dialogue, that results in reflection, action and learning" (Rolfe, 2006). This alliance that fosters growth and collaboration has not only been true for the mentor-mentee relationship, since the mentors' role has also constructively strengthened the team of practitioners by injecting the student service delivery with new energy of positive practices and support to students:

In each institute, we meet once a month, for a 2-hour meeting. We see how we can work together, we discuss our issues regarding difficult cases, so this is where interventions are sort of developed. [...] For example, we are currently discussing between us to write what we call a 'unified report' where we say in these cases, we have done so. And this becomes a handbook for our mentors and everybody around. Thus, we are adopting a proactive approach, instead of being reactive to our client group. We also get speakers who come to speak to us. So, it's a training area too. (CAB)

The reinstatement of multidisciplinary team meetings provided a space for the whole team to discuss cases together as a means to better monitor students and to make them feel supported. Moreover, these practices have instilled a sense of shared responsibility between practitioners when planning interventions. As a result, the team is empowered to foster a coherent shared system on how to deal with future cases, as well as to align their service delivery as a unified organisational structure.

Increase in Referrals

Unlike student mentors, the other professionals do not seek students, it is the student who seeks their therapeutic or career guidance service. The professionals as well as their respective directors, concur that thanks to the student mentors they are all receiving more referrals and are therefore reaching more students:

Yes, they are definitely contributing, especially when it comes to referrals because sometimes when you have a class of students, it's easy for the quiet ones to get missed. I think that the mentors are working in that sense that they have the time to follow these students. As we wouldn't know that student 'A' needs career guidance hadn't it been for the mentor. Because student 'A' might be shy to seek us or might not admit that they need career guidance out of pride or out of disinterest. (CAA)

The student mentors' feedback suggests that the reason why referrals increased is that there were barriers that needed to be facilitated in order for the students to make use of the other student support services available at MCAST, as follows:

One of the counsellors told me that through us they manage to have more referrals. They are reaching more students. Why? They are located in a separate building and some of the students do not know about the role of the counsellors. Despite the induction meetings held by the student support services, wherein the counsellors and the career guidance come to speak to the students, most of the students [...] do not pay attention to the meeting. (SMA)

Student mentors are creating awareness of the services as they speak to students about them during group sessions. They also provide the human contact that physically introduces the mentee to the services, as they accompany their mentees to their initial sessions with the therapists or the career advisors. Thus, it becomes very clear that these students need both familiarity and safety as well as to be followed closely in order to open up. Furthermore, the student mentors are building the mentees' self-determination by empowering them to become more autonomous and by enabling them to use their inner resources to seek the services and the help they require (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2017).

Better Student Relationships

At the core of the mentor-mentee relationship there are two important elements. The student mentor's guardianship and determination to help the mentee, and the profound trust that the mentee has in the mentor who helps him/her to move forward. Connection is at the heart of SDT, which is an essential element as to why student mentors are achieving better student relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000). CAB's and C's observations confirm that the outcome of this mentoring relationship is reaping the benefits and achieving its aim towards the collective service delivery:

At first the student didn't want to be nice to her mentor. But then when the student was upset, she wanted only the mentor. So, the mentor went to meet with her, and she opened up about her difficulties. Then the mentor told her listen these are difficulties that therapy might help you with. They were more of a psychological nature. And the mentor accompanied her here and this student is in therapy now. But she is still being seen by the mentor for the more practical matters. (C)

At the end of the mentor's intervention she referred them to me. She told me, "There is a problem with this particular student. He came to speak to you in July but since then he has changed his opinion. Would you like to have a session with him?" That student would have probably never come back to me [...]. So, the mentor provides a flatbed for things to happen. She even finds out about the parents. For example, we have what I call helicopter parents, who always want to know what's happening with their kid, and the mentor is the first buffer. She will actually tell the parents, "let's have CAB handle it, you don't have to attend." So, she provides students a sort of crusader for their own thoughts. (CAB)

Student mentors are re-building mentees' trust towards caring adults and the services offered at MCAST. Mentors are providing their mentees with incessant support by listening to and advocating for them, by establishing structure, by challenging their inconsistencies and by reinforcing their strengths in the face of adversity or in the case of low self esteem (Satchwell, 2006). As a result, this provides a better footing for the other professionals to start their career guidance or counselling work with students. This means that students are more motivated and open to receive the help they require and to

address their issues. This is how prevention and intervention measures are working at a systemic level at MCAST.

Conclusion

The findings of this study seem to indicate that mentors are an invaluable resource as perceived by practitioners and management in order for them to reach out to students and avail themselves of the services on offer in a profitable manner. However, a further study that includes the students' perceptions of mentoring is required in order to compare these with the practitioners' views. Students would have helped the researchers understand which are the predominant areas they feel mostly supported by these professionals. Unfortunately, for the purpose of this study, it was not possible to gain access to students within the mentoring programme as they were also being involved with an internal study conducted by MCAST. This study proposed with students could be performed longitudinally with the aim to trace the degree of contact hours required between the mentors and mentees in order to observe and achieve long-term benefits out of mentoring relationships (DuBois et al., 2002; Satchwell, 2006; Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller & Rhodes, 2009). A mixed methods approach could be powerful in such an extensive research area so that generalisations could be made about this service as a means to inform MCAST management and policy making.

Overall, this study indicates and advocates that mentoring could be considered a feasible subsidiary resource supporting career guidance practitioners and counsellors within post-secondary institutions, as it helps them to adequately cater for full-time students' needs. Moreover, the support provided needs to empower students to have personal agency. In 2023, MCAST put this finding into practice as it has now employed student mentors on indefinite contracts and extended the service to all levels (MQF 1-6) at MCAST (Meeting with Career Advisor CAA on Monday 2nd October 2023). It would be ideal to replicate such a study given this new scenario. As Rolfe (2007) said metaphorically about lifelong career development skills and the empowering relationship between the mentor and mentee, "Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day; teach a person how to fish and they can feed themselves for a lifetime".

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Abstract The study analyses the newly introduced role of student mentors in the career advisory service at MCAST, the main vocational education and training institution in Malta. In view of the high rate of early leavers from education and training (ELET), the student mentor's role was implemented with the aim of improving student retention rates as well as to enrich their learning journey. Therefore, this study aims to examine how the new student mentoring programme is working from the perspective of management and professionals. Multiple perceptions about this programme were investigated by nine stakeholders through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with the student mentors, career advisors, counsellors and their respective

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Changements positifs dans l'éducation des adultes: Le rôle du mentorat des étudiants dans un collège professionnel à Malte

Jessica Borg and Katya De Giovanni

Résumé Cette étude analyse le rôle récemment introduit des mentors étudiants dans le service d'orientation professionnelle du MCAST, le principal établissement d'enseignement et de formation professionnels à Malte. Face au taux élevé d'abandon précoce de l'enseignement et de la formation (ELET), le rôle de mentor étudiant a été instauré dans le but d'améliorer les taux de rétention des étudiants et d'enrichir leur parcours d'apprentissage. Par conséquent, cette étude cherche à examiner le fonctionnement du nouveau programme de mentorat étudiant du point de vue de la direction et des professionnels. Les perceptions multiples de ce programme ont été explorées à travers des entretiens semi-structurés enregistrés avec neuf parties prenantes, notamment les mentors étudiants, les conseillers en orientation professionnelle, les conseillers et leurs directeurs respectifs. Les données ont été analysées à l'aide de l'analyse thématique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Trois thèmes principaux ont émergé, reflétant l'impact des mentors étudiants au MCAST et la dynamique entre les professionnels : réintégration des réunions de l'équipe pluridisciplinaire, augmentation des références et amélioration des relations avec les étudiants. Les résultats indiquent que le programme de mentorat a été positivement perçu par les participants en raison des divers avantages qu'il a apportés à l'ensemble des services offerts.

Cambios positivos en la educación de adultos: El papel de la tutoría de estudiantes en un centro de formación profesional de Malta

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Resumen Este estudio analiza el papel recientemente introducido de los estudiantes mentores en el servicio de orientación profesional de MCAST, la principal institución de educación y formación profesional en Malta. Ante la alta tasa de abandono temprano de la educación y la formación (ELET), se implementó el rol de mentor estudiantil con el objetivo de mejorar las tasas de retención de estudiantes y enriquecer su experiencia de aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, este estudio busca examinar cómo está funcionando el nuevo programa de tutoría de estudiantes desde la perspectiva de la dirección y de los profesionales. Las percepciones sobre este programa fueron investigadas a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas grabadas en audio realizadas a nueve partes interesadas, incluyendo mentores estudiantiles, orientadores profesionales, consejeros y sus respectivos directores. Los datos fueron analizados mediante análisis temático (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Se identificaron tres temas principales que reflejan el impacto de los mentores estudiantiles en MCAST y la dinámica entre los profesionales: restablecimiento de las reuniones del equipo multidisciplinario, aumento de las derivaciones y mejora de las relaciones con los estudiantes. Los resultados indican que el programa de mentoría fue positivamente aceptado por los participantes debido a los diversos beneficios que aportó a la prestación general de servicios.

Palabras clave educación postsecundaria; MCAST; ELVET; tutoría de estudiantes en riesgo; orientación profesional