Mentoring programmes beat the online blues

For many students this winter semester is the second semester they have spent studying during the coronavirus pandemic, with virtually all teaching being offered remotely. They often suffer from a lack of motivation when studying from home and there is a lack of structure in their day to day lives. In a study, researchers at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) have now discovered that mentoring programmes can reduce these problems and help students become more successful during an online semester.

For the study, the team of researchers led by Prof. Dr. Johannes Rincke, Chair of Economic Policy, developed a mentoring programme in the summer semester of 2020 for students of the Bachelor's degree programme in Business and Economics at the School of Business, Economics and Society at FAU.

The researchers got students from higher semesters involved and trained them to become mentors. The idea behind the programme was not to provide subject-related advice, but to offer help with structure and organisational skills for students 'working from home'. The researchers subsequently asked students chosen at random if they would like to register for the mentoring programme and then compared them with students who had not registered.

The study with around 700 students demonstrated that a programme comprising only five online meetings with a mentor can significantly improve the outlook of students in a semester taught online. A survey of the students showed that they had considerably higher levels of motivation, looked more regularly at the content of their degree programme and were more likely to believe that they were doing enough work for their degree overall. The positive effects of the mentoring programme were not only evident in the survey results, but also in students’ improved performance. For example, mentoring programme participants registered to take more examinations after the end of the lecture period than those who did not take part in the programme.

One surprising finding of the survey is that high-achieving students benefited the most from the programme. Students who were among the top third of their class in the winter semester before the coronavirus pandemic completed more than one additional module (an additional 6 ETCS credits) thanks to the support provided by their mentors. Overall, high-achieving students enjoyed considerably more success thanks to the programme than those without this extra support, with the likelihood of passing all examinations after the first year of study increasing from 52 to 61 percent as a result.

The positive effects of mentoring were also apparent in students who are not high achievers. However, these effects were subject to a certain statistical uncertainty, which means the authors of the study cannot make any reliable statements about if and how weaker students benefit from mentoring.

With this study, researchers at FAU have identified a simple and, above all, very cost effective means of making online teaching at university level a success, as a place on the programme they have developed cost FAU only about 60 euros per semester.
The successful mentoring programme is just the beginning of a whole series of studies by the researchers at FAU about how universities can make their students more successful. Professor Rincke’s team has acquired substantial funding of 250,000 euros for the next three years from the German Research Foundation (DFG) for this research programme. Among others, these funds are currently being used to finance a survey for first-year students at FAU. The long-term aim of the study is to cut the number of students who drop out of university and to further improve students’ career prospects.

contact for scientific information:
David Hardt
Chair of Economic Policy
david.hardt@fau.de

Prof. Dr. Markus Beckmann
Junior Professor of Quantitative Labor Economics
markus.nagler@fau.de

Prof. Dr. Johannes Rincke
Chair of Economic Policy
johannes.rincke@fau.de

Original publication:
https://www.wirtschaftspolitik.rw.uni-erlangen.de/research/hnr.onlinementoring.pdf