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Enhancing Student Success Through a Multi-Dimensional Approach: The OPSA 2.0 Project at the Polytechnic University of Leiria

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Abstract

Designed as a comprehensive and innovative approach, the Observatory for Academic Success (OPSA 2.0) of the Polytechnic University of Leiria (IPLeiria), Portugal, aims to enhance academic success and reduce dropout rates, addressing the growing diversity of student profiles in higher education. Through a multi-dimensional framework, OPSA 2.0 is structured around seven pillars: a Mentoring Program; a Tutoring Program; a Pedagogical Training and Development Program; a Special Learning Support Program; an Academic Success Platform; a Together with the Community Program and a Coordination, Communication, Interaction, and Dissemination Program, ensuring the management and execution of OPSA 2.0 while promoting its activities, engagement, and results. OPSA 2.0 positions itself as a benchmark in pedagogical innovation, by integrating technology, pedagogy, and institutional collaboration, offering a holistic and transformative approach to supporting student achievement and mitigating early academic disengagement. By bridging theory and practice, this article presents the design of the OPSA 2.0 project, outlining its methodological framework, objectives, and core strategic axes.

Keywords: academic success; dropout; higher education; OPSA 2.0 project

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1. Introduction: Framing Academic Success in Portuguese Higher Education

Since the 2012/2013 school year, in Portugal, all children and young people must attend school until they complete secondary education or until they reach the age of majority, that is, 18 years of age, as stipulated by Law n.º 85/2009, of 27 August. This measure represented a significant change in national education policy, with the aim of reducing early school abandonment, promoting a more qualified society and reinforcing equal opportunities in access to knowledge.

By extending the compulsory school pathway, a more conducive context for the progression of studies was created, with more young people seeing Higher Education not only as a possibility, but as a realistic and desirable goal. At the same time, the Portuguese State and educational institutions have implemented a set of measures to facilitate the access to higher education, such as the enhancement and recognition of vocational education,

the expansion of vacancies in higher education, the reinforcement of social and financial support and the creation of new degrees and more flexible training pathways.

Currently, there is a noticeable shift in the focus of Higher Education Institutions, which, regardless of their scientific fields, have been developing coordinated strategies aimed at fostering student success, rather than merely ensuring access to higher education.

Although this is an indisputable reality, the definition of 'academic success' is not necessarily linear or consensual. This concept encompasses a wide range of factors, from academic performance to the development of personal, social, and professional skills. These evolve over time in response to labour market demands and to the increasingly diverse profile of students, rendering the concept complex and multifaceted, and allowing it to be articulated through different perspectives and dimensions. The search for a meaning of the term 'academic success', applied to Higher Education, led York et al. (2015) to identify six key components that are useful in understanding this area of study: (1) academic performance, which is the most traditional component regarding university students, and translates on the results of the formal evaluations to which the student is subjected; (2) the achievement of learning objectives, not only in a formal teaching context but also in extracurricular experiences, the so-called hidden curriculum; (3) the acquisition of skills that are the result of the application of knowledge, such as critical thinking; (4) satisfaction, which refers to the positive perception that the student has of his educational path; (5) the student's persistence, resilience and determination to overcome challenges and successfully complete their academic training; and (6) post-university performance, in which the former student transfers the skills acquired to the labor market and to his personal life.

On the other hand, when there is academic failure, there is a mismatch in expectations, in the educational system, in the institution, in the teacher or the student, in relation to reality, which often leads to abandonment. This reality brings huge negative consequences, not only for the student and his family, such as the feeling of failure, frustration, increased anxiety, low self-esteem, and instability for the household, but also for the higher education institution itself, which sees its economic resources underused and the quality of its training being called into question (Bernardo & Esteban, 2017).

For the above, and despite recognizing that the characteristics of students, such as age, socioeconomic and academic background, motivations, ambitions and career projects, among other elements, which have a significant impact in this domain (Delnoij et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2017), the truth is that higher education institutions are co-responsible for the success of their students. This factor reflects the quality and effectiveness of HEIs, which are therefore valued by accreditation agencies.

Teaching and assessment practices, as well as the academic culture or environment itself (size of the institution, interaction with teachers and colleagues, involvement with the community, support provided, schedules, among others), are, therefore, determining factors for student learning and well-being (Delnoij et al., 2020) and play a huge role in the reduction in dropout rates, which, according to Costa et al. (2024), "oscillate in most countries between 10% and 40% of entries" (p. 6). The same authors point to the first year of academic training as the most sensitive, since it is associated with problems of transition from Secondary to Higher Education, a sense of mismatch of expectations regarding the reality, difficulties in integration and adaptation, and low performance and learning.

Bearing this in mind, Higher Education Institutions have a duty to design structured and systematic programmes that not only support students in completing their degrees successfully but also foster a sense of achievement and the confidence necessary to engage meaningfully with future professional pathways.

2. The Polytechnic University of Leiria

The Polytechnic University of Leiria (IPLeiria) is a higher education institution located in the regions of Leiria and West, Portugal. Founded in 1980, IPLeiria has five schools: the School of Education and Social Sciences, the School of Technology and Management, and the School of Health Sciences (all in Leiria), the School of Arts and Design (Caldas da Rainha), and the School of Tourism and Maritime Technology (Peniche), as well as two additional training centres in Torres Vedras and Pombal.

IPLeiria emphasizes inclusion, cooperation, responsibility, innovation, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship. The institutional commitment to quality is clear in all dimensions of IPLeiria's activity, namely in teaching, and is aligned with the European quality benchmarks provided for in the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), as well as in the national benchmarks established by the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES). In addition to the accreditation of courses by A3ES, under the law, the accreditation of the Internal Quality Assurance System—SIGQ (certified after an audit by A3ES)—and the Institutional Assessment process by A3ES carried out in 2023 led to the unconditional accreditation of IPLeiria for six years (the maximum legally possible).

IPLeiria has been very committed in promoting the inclusion, wellbeing and success of all its students. Bearing this in mind, throughout the years, there have been several research studies carried out and different projects and initiatives implemented. Among those and in more recent years, it is worth highlighting the Skills 4Future Project: Innovative Practices (2022–2023) integrated in POCH-02-5312-FSE-000002, which aimed to promote the significant transformation of pedagogical practices across different levels of education and scientific areas and the Observatory for Academic Success of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (2023), operation POCH-02-5312-FSE-000030, aimed at promoting academic success and preventing drop-out.

As part of the funding provided by the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP 2021–2026), aimed at restoring sustained economic growth in the post-pandemic period, IPLeiria implemented two additional programs. The Impulso Jovens STEAM Program focuses on training and qualifying young people in the fields of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics, promoting initiatives that encourage higher education graduation rates in these areas and thus respond to emerging labour market needs. The Impulso Adultos Program targets the training and upskilling of adults, supporting initiatives designed to reskill and update the competencies of the active population.

Also noteworthy is the creation of the Working Group for Monitoring and Preventing Student Dropout at the Polytechnic of Leiria, created by the Order n.º. 258/2020 of the Presidency, with the purpose of identifying good practices and opportunities for improvement considering the academic success of students; and the 100% in® Project[1]—Social Innovation and Integral Inclusion, created in 2018. In 2020, it was approved by the Portugal Social Innovation Program, aimed at promoting the full inclusion of students with special educational needs and received registration as a Portuguese trademark with the number 637258 by the National Institute of Industrial Property.

As part of the support mechanisms available to students to help them overcome potential barriers, not only regarding the access but also the continuation of their studies, some stand out due to their broader impact: Personalized guidance for students regarding the option of part-time student status, which allows for the distribution of the course curriculum over a longer period, thereby reducing both the number of ECTS credits required per year and the annual tuition fee; Support in defining individual tuition payment plans, enabling tailored solutions to unforeseen financial or family difficulties, in order to reduce dropout rates due to financial hardship; Participation in the FASE®

Program[2]—Student Social Support Fund, which provides scholarships to students facing financial difficulties, in exchange for a few hours of weekly support to various IPLeiria services; Access to Student Support Centre—CAE[3]—offering psycho-pedagogical support, personal and social guidance and monitoring, psychological counselling, and vocational guidance; Support measures for students with specific educational needs, including the assignment of a Case Manager, who assesses needs and assists in developing an intervention plan; Access to various services and facilities provided by the Social Action Services[4], including medical services, scholarships, access to canteens and accommodation, participation in sports and cultural activities, connection to community resources, and access to emergency and exceptional financial aid; and Access to incentive schemes for international students, including merit-based scholarships, cooperation and development incentives (for students from Portuguese-speaking countries), the AUIP Scholarship Program, among others.

All the previous initiatives focus primarily on support services, psychological assistance, or help with personal issues which, although important, fall short of encompassing the full scope of what academic success entails, as outlined in the above contextual framework. For this reason, it was felt necessary to invest in a more comprehensive project—one that addresses not only the individual difficulties of students but adopts a more holistic and preventive approach, anticipating potential future challenges. As outlined by Mateus (2023), "the challenge lies in developing and implementing a holistic concept of support for higher education students, where different variables contribute to academic success as well as to each individual's happiness and well-being. [. . .] The proposal is to shift the focus from merely addressing students' needs from a narrow academic perspective to adopting a more global and transversal vision" (p. 9).

In this context, the Polytechnic University of Leiria sought to plan a set of integrated actions aimed at promoting not only scientific knowledge but also transversal skills, learning strategies, autonomous academic pathway management, as well as well-being and intrinsic motivation. This is based on the belief, supported by Costa et al. (2024), that "achieving success in higher education goes far beyond good academic performance or even completing one's degree with a passing grade" (p. 7).

3. OPSA 2.0 Project: Methodological Justification

In the academic year of 2023/2024 a call for the submission of Expressions of Interest for applications to the sub-measure "Innovation and Pedagogical Modernization in Higher Education—Program for the Promotion of Success and Reduction of School Dropout in Higher Education" integrated in the Impulso Mais Digital Investment was launched[5]. The proposals for funding were subject to the final approval of the Next Generation EU. The goal of this sub-measure is to ensure the regularity of initiatives to promote school success and to prevent retention and dropout, ensuring the implementation of initiatives over two school years. The target audience of this sub-measure is higher education students enrolled in the 1st year, for the 1st time. The priority initiatives to be supported under this sub-measure consist of programmes designed to promote academic success among higher education students. They aim to reduce failure and dropout rates while also anticipating and acting preventively in situations of potential withdrawal, particularly among students enrolled in the first year of Higher Professional Technical Courses (CTeSP) or Bachelor's degrees. The main objective of the sub-measure is to stimulate the development of mechanisms to support the academic integration of new students and the promotion of their success, especially through mentoring and monitoring mechanisms by teachers and peers, the adoption of innovative teaching and learning practices, the diversification of pedagogical methodologies and technological tools, by predicting situations of dropping out of higher education and by strengthening self-learning and teamwork practices.

In this regard, IPLeiria submitted an Expression of Interest under Investment RE-C06-i07 | Impulso Mais Digital—05/C06-i07/2023, within the scope of the Sub-measure on Innovation and Pedagogical Modernization in Higher Education—Program for the Promotion of Success and Reduction of School Dropout in Higher Education. The proposal presented by IPLeiria focused on the development of the OPSA 2.0 Project.

According to the rules of the call, institutional performance is monitored through two outcome indicators: (i) the increase in the renewal rate of first-time, first-year students enrolled in initial training programmes; and (ii) the increase in the average number of ECTS credits successfully completed by those students. In this regard, IPLeiria, through OPSA 2.0, committed to increasing the renewal rate by 1.63 percentage points, reaching 85.63%, which simultaneously implies an expected decrease in the average dropout rate to 14.37%, corresponding to a 10.2% reduction. With respect to the second indicator, IPLeiria committed to an improvement of 1 ECTS, aiming to reach an average of 43 ECTS per student, compared to the baseline value of 42.03 recorded in 2020/2021.

The project followed a structured, evidence-informed and participatory methodological process, combining institutional data analysis with qualitative and co-creation approaches, ensuring that students, faculty and support services contributed actively to the identification of needs and development of solutions (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Bovill, 2020).

The Design Thinking approach structured the co-creation process through successive stages of empathising, problem definition, ideation, prototyping and testing, a methodology widely applied in educational innovation (Brown, 2008; Plattner et al., 2011; Razzouk & Shute, 2012).

Building on the conceptual and institutional framework outlined above, this article seeks to analyse the extent to which OPSA 2.0 constitutes an integrated, theoretically informed response to the challenges of transition, adjustment, success and persistence in higher education. Accordingly, it is guided by a central research question: how can a higher education institution conceive, develop and structure a multidimensional project for student success through participatory and evidence-informed design processes?

In this sense, this study pursues three scientific main goals:

(i) To systematise the conceptual and institutional rationale underpinning the design of OPSA 2.0, identifying the theoretical and empirical foundations guiding its multidimensional design;
(ii) To analyse how participatory and evidence-informed design processes were operationalised across the three methodological phases, diagnosis, co-creation/design and operational structuring;
(iii) To position OPSA 2.0 as a design-based case that contributes to scholarship on institutional innovation in higher education.

To achieve these goals, the process unfolded in three main phases: (1) the diagnostic phase, (2) the co-creation and design phase, and (3) the operational structuring phase, which are presented in detail in the following section.

4. OPSA 2.0 Project Co-Creation: Process and Discussion

4.1. The Diagnostic Phase—Data Sources and Problem Mapping

The diagnostic phase aims to know the reality of academic failure and dropout, specifically in IPLeiria. A literature review, based on relevant authors in contemporary scientific production on the subject, was followed by an analysis of the initiatives that the institution had recently promoted in the context of the previous Academic Success Observatory (OPSA IPLeiria), also seeking to identify, based on the work developed, proposals for future action that would support the new project. In addition, a systematic review of qualitative and quantitative institutional data, extracted from the Student Information System and from

the Internal Quality Assurance System (SIGQ), provided a more concrete and complete view of the specific state of IPLeiria in this area.

The literature review provided both an in-depth understanding of the issues underpinning the project and the theoretical basis needed to guide its activities. This process, considered central to the development of the new project, made it possible to identify, analyse and systematise recent scientific contributions, offering a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the state of the art in relation to the characteristics of academic success and dropout situations in higher education.

In addition to clarifying the structural concepts and relevant theoretical references already exposed in this article, this review made it possible to identify gaps, emerging trends, and relevant methodological approaches, thus providing a solid basis for defining the project's operational options.

Seeking to highlight the main ideas, it is important to mention the Retention theory, particularly the work of Tinto (1993) and later Bean and Eaton (2001), which emphasises the central role of academic and social integration in students' persistence in higher education. According to these model, students are more likely to remain enrolled when they develop meaningful interactions with peers and faculty, experience a sense of belonging and perceive institutional support as responsive to their needs.

Building on this view, student success ecosystem models proposed by Kuh (2007) and Kift (2009) argue that first-year experience, institutional culture, curricular coherence and access to support services are interdependent elements that shape academic performance and persistence.

A third pillar of the project rests on learning analytics and early warning systems, which have become increasingly central in international research on student retention and academic success (Siemens, 2013; Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020; Ferguson, 2012). These approaches highlight the value of using real-time data on learning behaviour, engagement and assessment results to identify students at risk and to support timely interventions.

Finally, it is important to highlight the importance of faculty development, recognising that teaching quality and pedagogical innovation are essential determinants of student engagement and learning outcomes (Gibbs, 2013; Amundsen & Wilson, 2012).

From the above, it is clear that literature reinforce the importance of differentiated, evidence-based interventions that promote student success and mitigate dropout risks, including mentoring and tutoring structures, active and student-centred pedagogical approaches, dissemination of retention-oriented practices, and systematic monitoring and early detection mechanisms—approaches aligned with theoretical models emphasising institutional integration, support and belonging as determinants of student persistence (Tinto, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Kuh et al., 2006).

Analysis of the implementation reports for the first OPSA showed that this project took stock of the state of failure at IPLeiria and promoted specific initiatives, notably the Ubuntu Circles, which provided spaces for meeting, learning and personal development by creating a safe and welcoming environment in which participants, students and teachers, were placed in each other's shoes, seeking to understand their shared emotions and perspectives.

The final report of OPSA IPLeiria proposes actionable and realistic measures to be implemented in the future, including: early identification and support mechanisms for at-risk students; more flexible learning pathways; improved student engagement and integration, especially during the first year; expansion of the role of academic and psychosocial support services; foster a more inclusive and connected learning environment; foster students participation in extracurricular activities and alignment of institutional practices with the diverse profiles and needs of students. The report also stressed the importance of creating a peer mentoring program as well as a tutoring program.

Data extracted from institutional platforms included: socio-demographic characteristics, admission pathways, enrolment data, number of completed ECTS, progression patterns, academic status, participation in support services and engagement data from Moodle. Two analytical tools structured the diagnostic phase: Dialogue Mapping, used to structure collective discussions based on the IBIS framework, enabling the visual organisation of perspectives, issues and arguments and supporting shared understanding during the diagnostic phase (Conklin, 2006), and a Problem Concept Map, which allowed for the identification of relationships among academic, socio-emotional and contextual variables associated with dropout, helping to synthesize complex institutional data (Novak & Cañas, 2008; Trochim, 1989).

The longitudinal analysis of the cohorts of students from the 1st year/1st time of IPLeiria who attend Higher Professional Technical Courses and Bachelor's Degrees, in the reference period of 2020/2021 to 2024/2025, allows us to identify significant trends in two central dimensions: the registration renewal rate, used as an indirect indicator of dropout, and the average number of ECTS completed, considered as a measure of academic success.

Although widely used in Portuguese higher education, and officially adopted in several national monitoring and funding instruments, including in the present call, the renewal rate remains an indirect indicator of dropout. It does not distinguish between temporary interruption, voluntary withdrawal or institutional transfer. For this reason, while analytically useful, it should be interpreted alongside complementary indicators and contextual qualitative evidence. A similar limitation applies to the average number of ECTS completed, as it captures only one dimension of academic success, omitting aspects such as student engagement, learning quality, sense of belonging, or progression in non-formal learning pathways. Nevertheless, because both measures are prescribed as reference indicators within the call, they constitute the operational benchmarks against which institutional performance and the effectiveness of OPSA 2.0 will be assessed. In this context, it should be noted that the reference year for the OPSA 2.0 Project is 2020/2021, which coincides precisely with the period of greatest impact of the extraordinary measures adopted to mitigate the effects of the COVID 19 global pandemic. Among the measures implemented in the field of education directly affecting the freedom to learn and to teach, were the closure of schools and higher education institutions, the widespread adoption of distance learning and the use of new electronic tools and platforms to complement the teaching/learning process, both for teaching and for assessment (Monteiro & Cebola, 2021). It was precisely in the transition from 2020/2021 to 2021/2022 that the highest rate of renewals was recorded, with a value of 84% (Table 1).

Table 1. Renewal rate—IPLeiria, 2020/21–2024/25.

Cohort	Enrolled (N)	Renewed (N)	Renewal Rate (%)
2020/2021 → 2021/2022	3842	3216	84%
2021/2022 → 2022/2023	3819	3112	81%
2022/2023 → 2023/2024	3635	2933	81%
2023/2024 → 2024/2025	3320	2772	83%

Source: prepared by the authors based on institutional data.

This result can be explained by the set of flexibility measures adopted by higher education institutions to mitigate dropout: adjustments in evaluations and assessment methods, extension of deadlines, and reinforcement of emergency support, both financial and psychosocial. In addition, public policies for social and economic support were also strengthened, including emergency grants, additional direct financial aid for students in vulnerable socio-economic situations, as well as support measures for housing and food, with alternative solutions during the closure of canteens and residences. Psychological

support services and student health centers, including medical consultations specifically targeting students, were also created and/or reinforced (Conselho Nacional de Educação & Centro de Investigação de Políticas de Ensino Superior, 2021). These policies, in conjunction with the resilience of the academic community and particularly of the students, contributed to the maintenance of educational and training trajectories. At IPLeiria, all students were granted access to the special and exceptional examination periods, with flexibility regarding the number of curricular units in which they could enroll, particularly in the case of final-year students.

This pattern is consistent with international analyses showing that, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, no generalised increase in dropouts was observed. On the contrary, in several contexts there was even an increase in renewal rates (European University Association, 2021; European Higher Education Area, 2021). This outcome is explained by: (i) economic uncertainty, which historically tends to stimulate demand and continuity of studies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021a, 2021b); (ii) the adoption of protective assessment and evaluation policies (no detriment policies) implemented across several European institutions (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2020); and (iii) the reduction in indirect costs associated with emergency remote teaching (travel and accommodation).

In subsequent years, a slight decrease to 81% was observed (2021/2022–2022/2023), a value that remained stable from 2022/2023 to 2023/2024 (Table 1). This decrease may reflect the adverse effects of the prolonged period of online learning: digital fatigue, social isolation, lack of motivation, factors that tend to negatively affect students' adaptation, well-being and satisfaction. However, it is important to note that this impact was not uniform: it affected more severely those students in more vulnerable conditions, such as those with lower socioeconomic support, without access to adequate infrastructure for distance learning or with added family and professional responsibilities, circumstances that substantially increase the probability of dropping out.

The gradual and progressive return the face-to-face teaching, in 2023/2024, was accompanied by a moderate increase in the renewal rate for 2024/2025, of 83%. Although still below 2020/2021 levels, this evolution suggests a positive stabilisation trend, possibly linked to the resumption of academic normality, the integration of digital tools consolidated during the pandemic, into the teaching-learning process and the reinforcement of institutional strategies such as peer mentoring programs, teacher-student tutoring and early monitoring of signs of risk of academic dropout (Dagorn & Moulin, 2025; Flores et al., 2022).

The academic performance of first-year students reveals fluctuations that accompany the pandemic and post-pandemic context as well as the prevailing teaching-learning conditions in each academic year. In 2020/2021, the average number of ECTS completed stood at 43.29. In 2021/2022 there was a decrease to 39.97, reflecting the difficulties of prolonged remote teaching. After the lockdowns resulting from COVID-19, in 2022/2023, there was a partial recovery in the academic performance of IPLeiria students, reaching an average of 40.6 ECTS completed. However, the trend did not consolidate, as the following year saw a significant decline, with the average settling at 39.39 ECTS, a lower result than that observed in 2021/2022, as can be seen in Table 2.

The evolution of the average number of completed ECTS mirrors the pedagogical and contextual dynamics that characterised each academic year. The marked decline in 2021/2022 reflects the documented difficulties associated with extended periods of online learning, including decreased student engagement, digital fatigue, challenges in autonomous study and reduced opportunities for collaborative learning. The partial recovery observed in 2022/2023, although still below pre-pandemic levels, indicates a gradual re-establishment of learning routines and a positive institutional response through

reinforced pedagogical and psychosocial support mechanisms. These trends highlight the importance of targeted interventions—such as active learning, personalised follow-up and early detection of at-risk students—which constitute central components of the OPSA 2.0 strategic framework.

Table 2. Average ECTS—IPLeiria, 2020/2021–2023/2024.

Cohort	Average ECTS (Year of Entry)
2020/2021	43.29
2021/2022	39.97
2022/2023	40.6
2023/2024	39.29

Source: prepared by the authors based on institutional data (OPSA 2.0).

This pattern suggests that, although the pandemic initially led to a decrease in the average number of credits completed, student's academic performance shows signs of consistent recovery. This positive evolution may be linked not only to the return to face-to-face teaching, but also to the reinforcement of pedagogical and psychosocial support mechanisms, to the increased attention to student well-being and mental health and to the capitalisation of digital skills acquired during remote teaching.

From the perspective of OPSA 2.0, these results underscore the importance of differentiated strategies aimed at promoting student success and reducing dropout: (i) strengthening mentoring and tutoring programmes, ensuring personalised student support (ii) implementing innovative, active and student-centered pedagogical practices, fostering students' engagement and motivation; (iii) dissemination of good practices regarding retention; and (iv) systematically monitoring of academic outcomes (average ECTS). The intersection between empirical evidence and intervention mechanisms confirms the pertinence and relevance of the OPSA 2.0 Project and its programmes, as a monitoring tool and as a support mechanism for promoting the quality of the teaching-learning process as well as an institutional culture fostering and promoting quality, inclusion and academic success.

The evolution of the average number of completed ECTS reflects the learning conditions that characterised successive academic years. After the significant decline in 2021/2022—consistent with documented institutional challenges associated with long-term online learning, including reduced engagement, digital fatigue and motivational disruption (Flores et al., 2022; Monteiro & Cebola, 2021)—the partial recovery in 2022/2023 suggested the gradual reinstatement of learning routines supported by reinforced pedagogical and psychosocial responses (Costa et al., 2024; Mateus, 2023). The renewed decrease in 2023/2024, however, indicates that these gains were not structurally consolidated, highlighting persistent fragilities in student autonomy, motivation and continuity of study practices, particularly amongst more vulnerable groups (Dagorn & Moulin, 2025).

The diagnostic phase allowed us to gather different data on the phenomenon under study, in its different dimensions, which, according to the Theory of Change, helps to chart the path forward, from the short and medium term to real change in the long term. This theory was subsequently developed to articulate the intended mechanisms of change linking inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, providing a structured framework to clarify how the planned interventions were expected to generate the desired effects (Taplin et al., 2013). Thus, this stage proved to be essential, not only for a rigorous understanding of the phenomenon under analysis, but also for the informed selection of strategies to be implemented, ensuring their adequacy, consistency, and relevance to the research context.

4.2. The Co-Creation and Design Phase of an Institutional Project

The trends obtain with the diagnosis phase, allows to pass to the second phase, the project co-creation and design, taking into account the articulation between empirical evidence and institutional mechanisms that confirms both the analytical relevance and operational added value of OPSA 2.0 as a tool for understanding, supporting and improving the quality of the teaching–learning process and fostering an institutional culture of inclusion and academic success (Mateus, 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

OPSA 2.0 retains the original name to preserve institutional identity and recognition. Nevertheless, it constitutes a new initiative, advancing innovative strategic axes and programs specifically designed to address current institutional challenges and the evolving needs of students.

The OPSA 2.0 Project is fully aligned with the mission of IPLeiria as a public higher education institution committed to education, training, research, and innovation, and its structure, thematic programs, and implementation are, as demonstrated throughout this text, framed within conceptual frameworks supported and validated by academic research.

As previously mentioned, IPLeiria guides its action by the values of quality, creativity and innovation, ethics and responsibility, sustainability, plurality and inclusion, having dedicated special attention to the academic success of its students, acting in an integrated and holistic manner in the early detection of academic failure, in the prevention and consequent reduction in situations at risk of dropping out of school and in the development of measures for this purpose.

The admission, evaluation and decision process involved three phases. During the first phase, the presentation of manifestation of interest took place under an open and competitive procedure, allowing for the submission of proposals by higher education institutions individually considered or in consortium. phase 2 consisted of the evaluation of the proposals, which included a public presentation, followed by a negotiation period with the proponents with the intent of implementing a contract-program, including the plans and amounts of funding, approved in the meantime. Finally, phase 3, in which we currently are, is intended for the implementation of the proposed measures by the institutions with a follow-up of the implementation of the referred measures by the financing entity.

Recognizing that involving the academic community is crucial for the success of such a project, the project incorporated participatory design and co-creation methods, with the following steps:

(i) *Empathise:* consultations and meetings with the relevant stakeholders. Specifically, the bodies of the five schools, particularly the pedagogical councils, that are responsible for drafting proposals and providing insights on pedagogical strategies and teaching methods were actively engaged. As these councils comprise representatives from faculty and students, their participation ensured the integration of diverse perspectives into the project's design and implementation phases. Additionally, the course coordinators, who oversee and monitor course-related academic activities, and student associations were also involved in these consultations and meetings;

(ii) *Define:* systematic identification of needs related to the transition from secondary to higher education, covering aspects such as adaptation to the new academic and social context, learning difficulties, levels of motivation, well-being and sense of belonging. This phase included the analysis of qualitative and quantitative contributions collected from the different stakeholders, allowing for an understanding of the structural and contextual constraints experienced by first-year students;

(iii) *Ideate:* systematic identification of needs related to the transition from education Collective creation of proposals for action, based on brainstorming sessions and collaborative reflection sessions. At this stage, participants were encouraged to

propose innovative approaches that responded to the identified needs, promoting creativity and ensuring that the solutions reflected both the institutional reality and the experiences of the various members of the academic community;

(iv) *Prototype:* selection, structuring and progressive refinement of the best proposals, including activities and respective methodologies for action, allowing for their conceptual consolidation and the operational planning necessary for implementation.

The outcome of the four phases resulted in an application that received very positive feedback from the independent evaluative panel and the contract-program was signed in April of 2024. By comprising with the rules and regulations of the call, and taking into consideration the academic year of 2020/2021, IPLeiria committed to a 12.5% reduction in the dropout rate of students enrolled in the 1st year/1st time in initial training courses with an expected average reduce dropout rate from 16% to 14%, as well as an increase of 3 ECTS (to 45 ECTS) in the average number of ECTS completed by these students.

To ensure the success of the physical and financial implementation as well as to ensure the execution of the project and monitor its results, a coordination team was set up, which is responsible for managing the project, namely, to ensure the implementation of the proposed actions and monitor its results. To advise the coordinating team on the implementation of the Project a group of external consultants, national and international experts in the field, was created.

After some internal meetings to present and explain the project to the academic community, the public presentation of the Observatory for Academic Success—OPSA 2.0 took place, outlining the project's objectives and activities, on 13 June 2024, in the Auditorium of the Central Services of the Polytechnic of Leiria.

As evidenced in the presentation of its second phase, OPSA 2.0 draws on the student success ecosystem models proposed by Kuh (2007) and Kift (2009), integrating diverse community actors and multiple perspectives. By aligning these frameworks within IPLeiria's institutional strategy, the project enhances collaborative engagement and promotes a more holistic and sustainable approach to student success.

4.3. The Operational Definition Phase

The OPSA 2.0 project, currently underway, is inherently dynamic and flexible, allowing room for adjustments to proposed mechanisms according to the specific and concrete needs of each training context.

The transformation advocated by OPSA 2.0 aims to: Foster peer/mentor support for new students through the implementation of a Mentoring Program; Promote support for first-year students by faculty/tutors through the implementation of a Tutoring Program; Adopt innovative, active, and diverse pedagogical practices through a Pedagogical Training and Development Program; Strengthen self-directed learning and collaborative work practices, supporting students throughout their leaning journey, developing some personal, relational and social preparing them to face future challenges and to perform successfully, not only as future professionals but mainly as responsible and active citizens; Monitor, prevent, detect and mitigate situations of school dropout and academic failure through an implementation of a specific platform and; recognizing the importance and impact of IPLeiria in the regions where its campuses are located, developing measures with the surrounding community that allow for a better inclusion of our students.

To achieve its objectives, the OPSA 2.0 Project is structured around a set of Strategic Axes—programs designed to foster a more conducive academic environment, enabling the full development of students that was selected based on: (i) empirical relevance identified in the diagnostic phase; (ii) alignment with international research; (iii) feasibility; (iv) expected contribution to reducing dropout and improving success. These programs

are aligned with a transformative vision, aimed at creating consistent, lasting, and sustainable practices and include: a Peer Mentoring Program (student/student); a Tutoring Program (teacher/student); a Training and Pedagogical Development Program (teachers); Special Learning Support Programs (students); a Together with the Community Program. There implementation and development of these programs are supported by a Platform for Academic Success—plataform@sucessoacademico and a Coordination, Communication, Interaction and Dissemination Program.

These strategic axes serve to ensure the continuity of all the initiatives to promote school success and prevent dropout within IPLeiria, not only in the short and medium term, but also in the broader long-term horizon.

The decision to structure OPSA 2.0 around seven strategic axes derives directly from the empirical diagnosis presented in Section 3 and from established theoretical frameworks on student success. Peer mentoring and tutoring address the academic and social integration dimensions emphasised in retention theories (Tinto, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2001). The pedagogical development programme aligns with research demonstrating the centrality of teaching quality and active pedagogies in shaping first-year outcomes (Gibbs, 2013; Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). The learning support initiatives respond to evidence showing the effectiveness of structured reinforcement activities for students with lower academic preparedness (Vossensteyn et al., 2015; Delnoij et al., 2020). The Academic Success Platform operationalises principles of learning analytics and early-warning systems, enabling timely and data-informed interventions (Siemens, 2013; Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020; Ferguson, 2012). Finally, the programme Together with the Community draws on holistic models of student development that articulate academic engagement with well-being, belonging and participation in the wider social and cultural environment (Kuh, 2007; Kift, 2009; Mateus, 2023). Taken together, these seven axes constitute a coherent, theoretically grounded and evidence-based institutional response to the challenges identified.

4.4. Peer Mentoring Program (Student/Student)

The Mentoring Program of the Polytechnic University of Leiria was approved, through Regulation n.º 947/2024 of August 22, published in the Official Journal (Diário da República) n.º 162/2024, II Series. This regulation outlines the structure and guiding principles of the Mentoring Program designed to support the academic integration, adaptation, and overall success of first-year students. It clearly defines the program's core objectives while also detailing the roles and responsibilities of both mentors and mentees. Participation in the program (as mentor and as mentee) is voluntary and subject to enrolment. The matches between mentor and mentee take into consideration some compatibility criteria (Simões & Alarcão, 2011), taking into account the interests and characteristics of each element (DuBois et al., 2011).

Mentors serve as key facilitators of the academic, social, and personal development of first-year students and thus are selected based on predefined criteria expressly stated on the Regulation. Their support includes assistance with academic processes such as enrolment, course registration, and evaluation methods; orientation to institutional services such as libraries, dining facilities, academic offices, and student associations; encouragement to engage with peers and participate in extracurricular activities; and guidance in exploring the host cities (Leiria, Caldas da Rainha, Peniche, Pombal and Torres Vedras).

Mentors' participation in the program is formally recognized by IPLeiria through the Diploma Supplement upon completion of their degree. To encourage student participation, a total of 600 scholarships will be awarded (300 per year). Each mentor is eligible for one scholarship, regardless of the number of mentees. To have these benefits, mentors must take part in specific activities and meet the requirements outlined in the Regulation.

The Mentoring program is guided by several core objectives, including: supporting mentees during the initial reception and integration in the new school; promoting a cooperative spirit; develop complementary skills to basic academic training (course curricula), through participation in personal and professional development activities and recreational initiatives; fostering collaborative work and networking; foster freedom, autonomy and self-confidence through conviviality and cultural exchange; develop democratic values within the framework of active and participatory citizenship; raise awareness towards a culture of proximity and solidarity, mutual respect, enhancing a sense of institutional belonging. In this sense, and as stated by Mateus (2023) both the peer mentoring programs and the tutoring programs (between faculty/teachers and students) aim essentially to support students throughout their academic journey, "creating a permanent support network that ensures their balance, success, well-being, and full integration, while building a true sense of belonging" (p. 10). Despite that similarity the peer mentoring can have advantages over tutoring, considering that students identify with the experiences that the younger ones are living, adapting the support provided more easily to the needs of the mentees (Brady et al., 2014).

The OPSA 2.0 mentoring program is based on the Optimal Experience Theory or Flow Experience (Freire et al., 2016) and the Peer Mentoring model (Freire, 2016). According to the theory, if the interaction between the individual and the environment provides good experiences, that will enhance the promotion of skills and the consequent search for more complex challenges. The optimal or flow experience is, therefore, considered as a factor that promotes individual and social development, contributing to general well-being. Peer mentoring is a strong ally in promoting these experiences, by providing moments in which the student feels listened to and supported, thus increasing their sense of self-efficacy and self-complexity, which are determining factors for academic and professional success.

In practical terms, the OPSA 2.0 Mentoring Program is implemented with the active involvement of «senior» students (who are attending more advanced years of their academic training, regardless of the academic degree), who draw on their academic experience to provide personalized support, orientation, and encouragement to incoming students (first year students, enrolled for the first time at IPLeiria). It is expected for the mentors to guide their mentees in navigating academic procedures, engaging with institutional resources, and integrating into university life. Their role is central in easing the transition into higher education by offering both practical guidance and emotional support.

The definition of the peer mentoring program of OPSA 2.0 sought to safeguard the factors identified by Karcher and Berger (2017) as essential for the successful functioning of such a program: (1) prior training of mentor students; (2) high level of engagement and social interest of the mentors; (3) age or grade level difference; (4) provision of a support structure that allows for sustained commitment and strengthens the relationships established between mentors and mentees; (5) monitoring of mentor actions; (6) provision of information to mentees so they can effectively seek support from their mentors; and (7) involvement of mentors in formal moments of the program (e.g., closing session).

The peer mentoring could improve both the processes and the quality of university student learning (Fernadez-Martin et al., 2022). Furthermore, it stands out as an efficient and low-cost tool for higher education institutions (Arco et al., 2020).

4.5. The Tutoring Program

Tutoring is an educational process in which a reference figure, typically a faculty member (teacher), supports one or more students over an extended period (at least one academic year), with the aim of helping them reach their full potential and achieve both academic and non-academic goals (Núñez et al., 2013). The tutor follows the student's

progress closely, defining an individualized support plan tailored to their profile and specific needs. This guidance aims to assist students in overcoming potential academic, personal, or social challenges that may arise throughout their studies. Besides providing academic support, tutors are also responsible for guiding, motivating and accompanying students and thus contributing to the construction of meaningful learning experiences. Effective tutoring goes beyond the simple transmission of knowledge. It involves fostering critical and reflective skills that empower students to become more autonomous and reflective about their educational journey, allowing them to make informed decisions aligned with their goals (Grigorio, 2025). In this sense, tutors serve as academic guides helping to shape the student's academic and professional identity.

Bearing this in mind, the tutoring program was designed to support the academic development and educational path management of students at IPLeiria. Tutors, preferably faculty members from the student's own degree program, provide personalized support to small groups of first-year students, helping them explore and develop their intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal potential while contributing to the overall quality of teaching. Tutees are typically first-year students beginning their academic journey, but the program is also available to students in later years who request tailored support with their academic progress or need specific guidance during decision-making processes (e.g., changing degrees or choosing a specialization).

The tutoring program at IPLeiria was officially established through Order n.º 268/2024, which formalizes the creation of the Tutoring Program at the IPLeiria. This document defines the strategic and pedagogical framework of the program, emphasizing its role in promoting academic success, fostering inclusion, and enhancing the quality of higher education through structured, personalized student guidance. The implemented model of tutoring emphasizes the importance of teacher/tutor training, including the clear definition of the tutor's role based on the adopted model, and the joint development of tools to regulate and monitor tutoring processes (Veiga Simão et al., 2008).

The core mission of the tutoring program is to promote inclusion and academic success by easing the transition from secondary education—or other forms of access to higher education—into higher education. By offering individualized guidance, the program not only monitors and supports students' progress, but also contributes to the professional development of the faculty members involved, fostering reciprocal growth. Tutoring plays a key role in the development of soft skills, reinforcing confidence, promoting collaborative attitudes, and enhancing interpersonal and communication competencies among both students and tutors (Veiga Simão et al., 2008).

At its heart, the tutoring program provides both students and teachers with an opportunity to strengthen soft skills, enhance academic performance, and ultimately reduce dropout rates. It promotes a more supportive academic environment that empowers students to succeed and encourages faculty to engage in student-centred practices. Among its general goals, the program seeks to: encourage students' engagement with their degree courses by presenting potential career opportunities; promote strategies for autonomous work and consistent study habits; foster meaningful learning and improve academic outcomes; monitor students' progress throughout the semester (through attendance, engagement with digital platforms, and assessment results) using tools such as the plataform@sucessoacademico; strengthen soft skills in both students and teachers; identify and address risk factors by connecting students with appropriate institutional support; and cultivate a strong sense of belonging within the academic community.

Faculty participation in the tutoring program is formally recognized in their teaching performance evaluations, reinforcing the institutional value placed on pedagogical engagement and student support.

In line with the above, the mentoring and tutoring strategic axes of OPSA 2.0 align with the core principles of retention theory (Tinto, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2001). By creating structured and meaningful opportunities for sustained interpersonal interaction, these programmes foster academic integration and a sense of belonging, both of which are crucial to students' persistence, particularly for those who have recently transitioned into higher education.

4.6. Training and Pedagogical Development Program (Teachers)

Historically, the recruitment of higher education faculty has been based primarily on academic qualifications and scientific merit, often overlooking pedagogical training. Many professors are selected for their technical and scientific expertise, despite lacking formal preparation for teaching. However, there is a growing recognition that effective teaching requires more than content knowledge—it demands specific pedagogical skills and reflective practice (Salgado et al., 2019; Gonçalves & Alves, 2024).

As teaching is increasingly seen as a complex and demanding profession, higher education institutions are placing greater emphasis on faculty development, investing in pedagogical training programs that allow educators to foster meaningful student learning and ensure teaching quality. As Alves and Gonçalves (2024) point out pedagogical training provides teachers with the necessary tools for curriculum design, critical reflection, and collaborative practice, fostering a stronger connection to teaching and academic life. It is expected that such training will enable faculty to face current educational challenges with greater confidence and creativity.

In line with the best national and international practices, the Training and Pedagogical Development Program at IPLeiria is committed to fostering knowledge while empowering faculty through the development of professional, interpersonal, and transversal skills. This commitment aligns with the perspective that training alone does not guarantee improved teaching, but it is a substantial element in any process of change (Flores, 2016). Therefore, investing in the continuous professional development of faculty is essential to address emerging challenges in higher education, as previously stated.

This OPSA 2.0 program seeks to inspire academic staff to promote high-quality teaching by focusing on three core areas: the planning of curricular units and teaching-research activities; the implementation of innovative pedagogical practices that place students at the center of the teaching and learning process; and the enhancement in assessment and feedback strategies. The implementation of innovative pedagogical practices requires faculty to develop specific competencies. As highlighted by Alves and Gonçalves (2024), pedagogical training can support changes in teachers' beliefs and practices, with positive effects on student learning outcomes.

The Training and Pedagogical Development Program offers a range of short-term, cross-cutting training initiatives in areas such as: teacher/tutor preparation aimed at integrating faculty into the Tutoring Program; pedagogical training for newly hired teachers as they begin their teaching roles at IPLeiria; innovative approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment; diversification of teaching methodologies and the integration of technological tools in the learning environment; student-centered pedagogy grounded in the principles of differentiated and inclusive education; assessment and feedback techniques; as well as the development of soft skills, coaching practices, and emotional intelligence.

The diversity of training initiatives offered by the program reflects the need for a comprehensive approach to faculty professional development, is consistent with research (Gibbs, 2013; Amundsen & Wilson, 2012) demonstrating that well-designed faculty development initiatives contribute to more student-centred pedagogies, improved assessment practices and enhanced academic success. According to Huet (2023), the professional devel-

opment of higher education teachers should involve activities of reflection and pedagogical inquiry, with the aim of innovating and enhancing teaching practices.

4.7. Special Learning Support Programs (Students)

Alongside the training program aimed at developing faculty knowledge and competences, it is deemed essential to involve students in the teaching-learning process, as well as to make them aware of their role as peers in the monitoring, support and guidance of their 1st year/1st time colleagues.

Adopting a holistic perspective of higher education students means recognizing that their adaptation and success depends on a dynamic interplay of institutional, personal, and contextual factors (Seco et al., 2012). Considering the increasing diversity within the student population, institutions must focus on the comprehensive development of learners through training initiatives that proactively address varied and specific needs (Seco et al., 2012).

In this context, a plan of workshops was prepared. This plan includes training, not only on academic related issues, such as study methods and time management, but also personal and motivational development actions, such as self-knowledge, emotional intelligence, stress, management, and positive psychology.

The development of transversal skills is particularly important, as these competencies prepare students to navigate the academic, personal, and professional challenges they face throughout their journey in higher education. As noted by Seco et al. (2012), such skills are fundamental to academic achievement and to students' overall well-being.

To promote academic success, particularly in subjects with the highest failure rates, a support plan has been implemented involving study sessions for small groups of students.

Learning support has a dual purpose: on the one hand, it aims to boost the academic success of students entering higher education without the scientific knowledge or autonomous study skills typically required for academic achievement (Vossensteyn et al., 2015), following a remedial teaching approach (Delnoij et al., 2020); on the other hand, it seeks to promote the development of new abilities that are essential for high-quality academic performance.

4.8. Together with the Community Program

Being a national and international reference institution, IPLeiria takes on a central and increasing responsibility in enhancing the quality of life of individuals and institutions in the regions where it is located. This is pursued through a wide range of educational, social, economic, cultural, artistic, and environmental initiatives.

The aim of this program is to foster the creation and strengthening of existing collaborative networks—not only with municipalities in the cities hosting its campus but also with regional social, cultural, and sports organizations—to promote the socio-cultural inclusion of IPLeiria students. As emphasized by Mateus (2023), this includes "support for sports, cultural, and social activities, with the involvement of student associations and other organizations, promoting volunteer activities and inclusive practices that instil social responsibility" (p. 14).

Additionally, several initiatives are being developed to encourage intergenerational interaction, particularly through the IPLeiria 60+ Program. These include residential arrangements where younger students share living spaces with senior students, as well as opportunities for alumni to engage as mentors, supporting the academic and professional development of current students.

4.9. Platform for Academic Success

To increase academic success and reduce dropout rates, it is essential to detect at-risk students early, allowing for timely and more effective interventions. As Ribeiro et al. (2017)

point out, "there can be no adequate, competent intervention capable of achieving the defined goals without proper knowledge of the problem and of the individuals upon whom action is intended" (p. 188). This highlights the importance of informed strategies based on accurate data and context analysis. This is where early detection systems (EDS) or early warning systems (EWS) come into play. These systems aim to accurately predict the risk of student dropout in order to enable increasingly individualized intervention. As noted by Filho and Silveira (2021, p. 482), "the existence of an EDS can serve as a starting point for more in-depth research on school dropout, as well as provide valuable insights to support strategic processes and decision-making."

With this in mind, and as part of a broader effort to implement data-informed solutions, the first Observatory for Academic Success (OPSA) developed a platform to systematically collect data about students of each degree, specifically relating to enrolments (in each curricular unit), admissions, graduations, and dropouts. For each student, information regarding the admission process, academic performance (number of approved ECTS and final grades for each curricular unit), academic status, special statuses awarded, and sociodemographic details are gathered.

The platform aligns with IPLeiria's Internal Quality Assurance System (SIGQ) and enables real-time monitoring and characterization of students' academic success and dropout rates by degree, by school and in institution wide.

To proactively address potential issues and enhance academic success, the platform aims to incorporate a predictive system to identify students at risk of academic failure or dropout. This predictive system will utilize artificial intelligence and data science models, offering a multidimensional analysis of students' personal, academic, demographic, and social profiles. Its main features will include identifying key indicators of dropout and academic success, recognizing and classifying students at risk, and implementing an alert system for such cases.

Additionally, the platform intends to continuously monitor students' attendance in classes and assessments, as well as their interaction with Moodle, which is the educational support platform at IPLeiria, throughout each academic semester. The results from intermediate assessments in curricular units will also be tracked and used by predictive models.

The primary objective of this platform is to identify risk situations in real time, enabling timely and effective interventions, that include contact between students, their tutors, and course coordinators to facilitate supportive measures. The Academic Success Platform within OPSA 2.0 explicitly operationalises the rationale of learning analytics and early warning systems (Siemens, 2013; Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020; Ferguson, 2012) by integrating administrative, pedagogical, and engagement data to generate informed and targeted support.

4.10. Coordination, Communication, Interaction and Dissemination Program

Communication is a decisive factor for the promotion of an institutional culture that fosters the sharing of information and the involvement of all members of the academic community. The processes of disseminating IPLeiria's activity are essential to ensure the connection to the community, enhancing internal and external knowledge of the quality of training and the different initiatives, actions and programs to support students, namely those aimed at promoting academic success and reducing dropout.

Besides some of the actions previously mentioned it is schedule to hold two annual conferences by the end of each academic year (2024/2025 and 2025/2026), to present the results and impact of the actions implemented in the respective school year, with the one for 2025/2026 also intended to share the overall evaluation of the work developed by all parties and the achievement of the goals proposed in the project.

To further enhance external communication, an official OPSA website was developed to aggregate all relevant information concerning the Academic Success Observatory (https://opsa.ipleiria.pt—accessed on 10 September 2025). This portal serves as an information hub for students, faculty, and other stakeholders, providing a comprehensive overview of its initiatives and resources. The website includes detailed information on the project's strategic axes, and the coordination and communication activities and events. Additionally, the website features updated news on project activities, registration forms for the mentoring and tutoring programs, and other supplementary resources for the academic community. Furthermore, all the training actions and workshops are also accessible on the website to both teachers and students, and their respective registration forms are also accessible on the website.

Communication, however, goes beyond the internal sharing of processes, actions, and results; it also plays a crucial role externally, particularly in reaching out to prospective students. As Mateus (2023) emphasizes "work begins before student admission, through the construction and availability of clear, organized information on higher education institutions' websites, enabling students, parents, and educators to make informed choices about the field of study, the course, the type of education, the necessary funding, and the available support" (p. 13).

Also, regarding the external communication, it is also word mentioning the dissemination of the Project's results in the academic and scientific community, national and international, namely through participation in events and the publication of scientific articles.

To support a clearer understanding and a better visualization of the institutional architecture of OPSA 2.0, the table below synthesizes its seven strategic axes, outlining their core purposes and their expected outcomes (Table 3). This visual representation complements the narrative description by providing an integrated overview of how the different programmes converge to advance a coherent, multidimensional approach to student success.

Table 3. Summary of OPSA 2.0 Axes.

Strategic Axis	Target Group(s)	Core Purpose	Expected Outcomes
Peer Mentoring Programme	Students	Facilitate peer integration, guidance and support	Increased autonomy and sense of belonging, ease adjustment to higher education
Faculty Tutoring Programme	Teachers/Students	Provide personalised academic guidance and support	Improved performance, informed decision-making, higher retention
Pedagogical Training and Development Programme	Teachers	Strengthen teaching quality and foster pedagogical innovation	Increase student-centred practices, enhanced engagement and learning
Special Learning Support Programmes	Students	Develop academic and transversal skills	Stronger self-regulation, higher success rates in high demanding subjects
Together with the Community Programme	Academic Community/Local and regional stakeholders	Promote inclusion, civic engagement and community integration	Cultural belonging, well-being, sense of purpose and responsibility
Academic Success Platform	Academic Community	Monitor progression, detect risk, enable timely intervention	Earlier support detection, targeted measures, reduced dropout
Coordination, Communication and Dissemination Programme	Academic and Scientific Community	Ensure governance, visibility and sustainability	Institutional alignment, develop culture of success, long-term consolidation

Source: prepared by the authors.

5. Conclusions

The OPSA 2.0 Project represents a strategic and innovative response by the Polytechnic University of Leiria to the growing challenges of academic failure and dropout in higher education.

By adopting a holistic and multidisciplinary approach, grounded in peer and faculty support, pedagogical development, student empowerment, and data analysis, OPSA 2.0 aims to contribute to the construction of a more inclusive and success-oriented academic environment. Its multidimensional design acknowledges that academic success is shaped not only by cognitive skills, but also by emotional, social, institutional, and contextual factors.

The collaborative and cross-disciplinary nature of the project seeks to foster a cultural shift within the institution, promoting shared responsibility for student achievement.

Although OPSA 2.0 Project is formally limited to a two-year duration, its underlying goal is to establish long-term and sustainable impact. The mentoring and tutoring programs, along with the pedagogical development actions, are intended to promote internalization of key competences that extend beyond immediate academic outcomes, supporting students and faculty throughout medium and long term.

These initiatives are envisioned as foundational references for institutional practice, reinforcing student engagement, equity, and academic perseverance across an increasingly diverse student population.

Limitations and Challenges

Despite its conceptual ambition and comprehensive scope, the implementation of OPSA 2.0 will face several challenges. Beyond the need to ensure sustained engagement of mentors and tutors, the progressive integration of pedagogical innovation across all study cycles, and the consolidation of the platform's predictive analytics component, additional difficulties may influence the robustness of the proposed ecosystem.

The institutional heterogeneity of IPLeiria may affect the effectiveness of specific interventions, as different schools may exhibit distinct organisational cultures, strategic priorities, and levels of readiness in terms of knowledge and experience, requiring continuous monitoring and adaptive management. Furthermore, long-term viability depends on stable funding and strategic continuity to support ongoing tool updates and alignment with evolving pedagogical and demographic contexts. These challenges underscore the importance of maintaining an institutional commitment to student success beyond the formal duration of the project.

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Notes

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