



Co-designing and delivering a peer led induction program at the University of Minho: The Sou.UMinho experience

Manuel João Costa, Universidade do Minho, Portugal

Marta Lopes, Universidade do Minho, Portugal

Julia Costa, Universidade do Minho, Portugal

Filipe Rocha, Universidade do Minho, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The “Sou.UMinho” program is the University of Minho’s institution-wide initiative aimed at supporting Year1 student success through co-design and distributed leadership. The program is founded on two core principles: active student participation in decision-making about design, and a peer-assisted welcoming and onboarding experience.

Until 2018, new-student orientation at UMinho was organized by central services using inputs from the Schools and the Students’ Union. In 2019 a participatory model was piloted, involving students, faculty and support staff in design and delivery — this became Sou.UMinho. In 2021 the Rector formalized the concept by creating an Induction Committee to secure ongoing stakeholder engagement and to continuously improve the program based on lessons learned. In 2024 the program expanded into Sou.UMinho 5.0: a multi-week, multimodal onboarding pathway combining digital tools and peer mentoring, enabled by external funding that extended the activity from a one-week welcome to a year-long first-year support program.

Student associates are central to the program. In the opening weeks they provide new students with essential information on campus life, academic expectations and support services, recording nearly 2,900 student interactions in 2024. Working closely with student services, they embody a sustainable, peer assisted model of shared leadership and co-creation to enhance belonging and success of new students. Unique in Portugal for its genuine community ownership and iterative development, the program represents a significant institutional step in embedding partnership at the core of university practice.

Keywords: peer involvement, welcoming and onboarding, student engagement, supportive campus environment

Introduction

A well-structured induction program can help first-year students feel more connected and supported, reducing feelings of isolation or alienation from the university community (Allen et al., 2024). Fostering early relationships is crucial for making students feel valued in the transition into higher education, as building connections with peers, faculty, staff, and mentors transforms their experiences and promotes a strong sense of belonging. When new students receive early peer support, their transition becomes smoother through relatable guidance and reassurance. Ultimately, peer-to-peer interactions and support are vital components of effective induction programs (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Gehreke et al., 2024).

The Sou.UMinho vision

“Sou.UMinho” (the direct translation of “I am UMinho”) aspires to create a supportive induction campus environment at the University of Minho (UMinho) where current students are active partners in shaping the integration experiences of new students. By fostering collaboration among students, staff, and academics, the program aims to design inclusive welcoming and onboarding experiences that promote community and belonging. Co-designing the program collectively helps students feel valued, supported and more connected to peers who enable their success throughout their university journey.

The Sou.UMinho story

The University of Minho traditionally organized a staff-designed and staff-led welcoming program for new students (around 3,000), held during the first week of the academic year. This program mainly included registration, campus orientation, welcome sessions led by course directors, and a formal ceremony with addresses from the Rector and the President of the Students’ Union. In 2019 student representatives and services felt the traditional program was overloaded with presentations and bureaucracy, and needed to better convey a positive welcome from day one. Sou.UMinho was launched that year as a peer-supported orientation; it prioritized peer involvement and high-level co-design between university staff and the Students’ Union.

The program implementation relied on a large number of volunteers designated ambassadors, whose role was to welcome every new student. These students supported newcomers with formal processes like registration and led activities such as campus visits and welcoming events. The goal was to create a peer-to-peer friendly campus environment, demonstrating the institution’s trust in students. The ambassadors were recruited through an open digital call shared via university and Student Union channels and social media. A "Sou UMinho" portal aggregated all relevant information for the new students, becoming the ‘one-stop’ digital point for newcomers.

The team for the first three pilots of Sou.UMinho were led by a Pro-Rector who coordinated schools, services and the Students’ Union. Working informally, the team codesigned the program to address and overcome the challenges students had identified in previous years. It also fostered a renewed sense of trust between the two parties, which proved to be essential for further developing and adapting Sou.UMinho in subsequent years, especially when COVID-19 struck.

Following the peak of the pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent fallout in 2021, the process was significantly adapted to new circumstances. As face-to-face activities resumed, incoming students were divided into small groups, with ambassadors serving as peer facilitators. They organized orientations, campus tours, and support sessions to ensure a smooth and engaging experience for new students. The small-group approach remains sustainable, with new students' first interactions still facilitated by ambassadors from the same or related degrees. Currently, the organization of these small-group activities is managed and led by the Students’ Union.

The 2021/2022 academic year marked a significant milestone, as it was the first year a committee was officially established by the rector to organize, manage, and evaluate student orientation. It operates annually from February to November and is reappointed each year, led by a Pro-Rector. It always includes representatives from the Students’ Union—now especially involved in areas of equality, diversity and

inclusion (EDI)—along with staff from services directly involved in welcoming activities and school representatives. Over time, the program broadened to involve more stakeholders and address specific needs. For example, Sou.UMinho adapted to international students' varied arrival schedules with hybrid welcomes and online induction sessions after registration, featuring course directors and peer input to support integration. The welcome itself was also reframed from a ceremony into a celebratory event after student cultural groups were engaged in the committee. In 2025, the university hosted a large festival from 2pm to midnight, planned through collective effort.

Sou.UMinho 5.0

Sou.UMinho 5.0 is the 2024 expanded version of the program, it is multimodal, digitally supported and funded externally, scaling the peer assisted practices trialed in the early editions. A cornerstone of the program is still the co-design by the Induction Committee, in which students continue to play a central role. Regarding peer-assisted interactions to promote belonging, this funding enabled Sou.UMinho to extend activities by four additional weeks, adding a structured onboarding sequence to the ambassadors' volunteer work and linking new students to further university support opportunities.

Recruited from second- and third-year cohorts via a competitive application process, they are deployed across our campuses to support new and late-arriving students and are easily identifiable in high-traffic areas. Working closely with coordinators in the Educational Support Service, they provide ongoing peer-to-peer assistance, orient students to physical and digital resources, and help resolve immediate academic or administrative issues. Their presence is particularly valuable for students arriving after term start, offering a welcoming point of contact and practical guidance. 85% of surveyed first-year students rated the older-peer action as "Very good" or "Good."

Finally, leadership of the process now sits with the Educational Support Service, under the Pro-Rector's supervision. This institutionalization builds specialist expertise and day-to-day autonomy within the team, securing program continuity across leadership changes and strengthening the university's capacity to evaluate and sustain student support strategically.

Final word

Following feedback from domestic and international students, several strengths are clear: timely, practical support at critical moments (applications, enrolment and registration); the professionalism and empathy of welcome teams and UMinho Ambassadors; well-organized logistics and relevant information; and the value of online welcome sessions.

Ambassadors Sou.UMinho

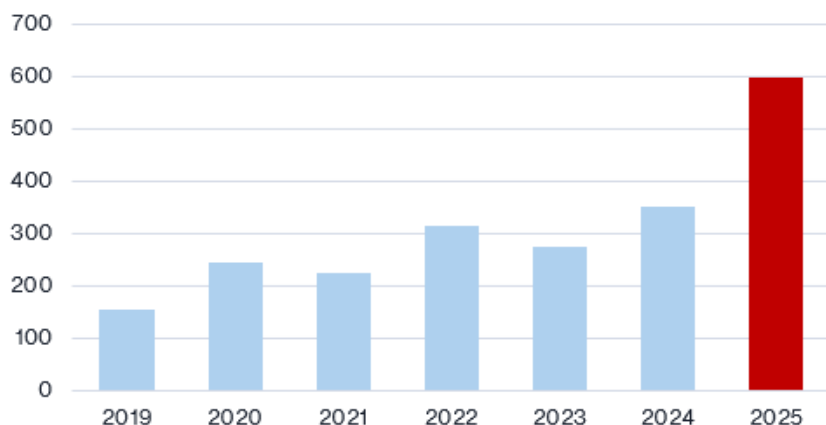


Figure 1 Number of enrolled Sou.Uminho Ambassadors from 2019 - 2025

Sou.UMinho is an example of a systemic, institution-wide initiative guided by peer involvement and co-creation. New students praise the program and interest in becoming peer supporters (see Figure 1) is at an all-time high.

Biographies

Manuel João Costa is an Associate Professor at the School of Medicine and the project lead for the Sou.UMinho 5.0 initiative. As Pro-Rector for Educational Innovation and Student Affairs (2018-2025) he initiated the Sou.Uminho program.

Marta Lopes is the Coordinator of the UMinho Hub Project. Marta has been part of the Sou.UMinho team since 2019, initially managing online registration and support for new students, and more recently contributing to the program's broader initiatives.

Júlia Costa serves as UMinho's Director of the Communication and Image Office. Julia has been part of the Sou.UMinho team since 2019, leading communication and outreach to strengthen the program's visibility and impact.

Filipe Rocha is the Director of the Support Unit for Educational Activities. Filipe has been part of the Sou.UMinho team since 2019, overseeing the implementation and coordinating the UMinho taskforce.

References

- Allen, K. A., Slaten, C., Lan, M., Craig, H., May, F., & Counted, V. (2024). Belonging in higher education: A twenty-year systematic review. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(5), 1-55.
- Carragher, J., & McGaughey, J. (2016). The effectiveness of peer mentoring in promoting a positive transition to higher education for first-year undergraduate students: a mixed methods systematic review protocol. *Systematic reviews*, 5(1), 68.

Felten, P., Lambert, L. M., Artze-Vega, I., & Miranda Tapia, O. R. (2023). *Connections are everything: A college student's guide to relationship-rich education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Gehreke, L., Schilling, H., & Kauffeld, S. (2024). Effectiveness of peer mentoring in the study entry phase: A systematic review. *Review of Education*, 12(1), e3462.

MacFarlane, K. (2018). Higher education learner identity for successful student transitions. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(6), 1201-1215.

Tinto, V. 1993. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. (2nd Ed.). University of Chicago Press.