Summary

INSPIRA is an Informatics female talent retention program, based on mentoring and activities to support the development of academic and professional trajectories of women in IT. INSPIRA was launched on April 28, 2022. Since then, INSPIRA has been developing group mentoring sessions through workshops, seminars, roundtables with role models, among others, and individual mentoring, in which a mentor works with a mentee to achieve the objectives defined by both. So far our open-to-the-public, group mentoring activities have involved 262 participants of all genders and career stages.

Description of the initiative

INSPIRA (https://inspira.dei.uc.pt/) is a mentoring program at the Department of Informatics Engineering of the University of Coimbra, in Portugal. The program was launched on April 28, 2022, and its overarching goal is to attract, support, and retain female talent, from students to researchers, and academics, in Informatics. Research recognizes mentoring as a beneficial strategy for mitigating disparities and supporting women in STEM [1]. Mentoring programs have been demonstrated to enhance women's self-confidence and eliminate a hostile culture [2].

INSPIRA aims to be part of the path towards diversity, equality, and equity in Informatics, so it aims to:

1. **Mentor female students, researchers, and professors in Informatics**. INSPIRA runs group and individual mentoring activities. Through its group mentoring activities, INSPIRA creates opportunities for learning and discussing relevant topics and for establishing meaningful connections with mentors and peers, creating a supportive environment. Through one-to-one mentoring, INSPIRA provides tailored guidance to mentees, to support them to thrive both in their careers and personal lives and to help them realize their full potential and pursue their goals confidently and resiliently.
2. **Foster an academic environment that includes everyone**. INSPIRA is committed to promoting inclusion, embracing diversity, and cultivating a supportive and nurturing environment that, aware of gender issues, strives to ensure the comfort, empowerment, and success of our academic community. Yes, our priority is to support women in Informatics and most of our participants are women. Lasting change requires everyone's participation, so everyone is welcome and we strive to keep an inclusive message that encourages everyone to take part in our events throughout the year.
3. **Create a space for sharing experiences, acquiring skills, and connecting with mentors and peers**. INSPIRA runs events on topics from career mapping in ICT to leadership, that can support women address challenges, and leverage opportunities, by listening to the examples and testimonials of role models and by getting in touch with peers who have embarked on their professional careers and are already in the job market. In these events, participants meet more experienced individuals who have walked similar paths and are eager to share their experiences and guidance,

allowing them to broaden their network, connect with people from diverse backgrounds, and foster future collaborations.

Types of events and activities

INSPIRA has two types of mentoring:

1. **Individual mentoring:** mentees engage in personalized mentoring sessions after they have been paired with a suitable mentor. Individual mentoring reflects a sustained relationship between a mentor and a mentee, where a more experienced individual[1] (mentor) supports the academic and/or professional development of a less experienced one (mentee) through listening, reflection, counseling, and training skills, identifying, and working on strengths and weaknesses.
2. **Group mentoring:** these are events open to everyone that may take the form of workshops, seminars, or discussion groups (please refer to Table 1 for examples). These sessions cover various topics such as career planning, leadership, presentation skills, personal branding, and networking.

INSPIRA organizes different types of events and activities:

1. **Public events:** These events, from roundtables, to talks, panel discussions, and workshops are open to everyone — students, researchers, professors, and staff from within or outside the department, irrespective of gender. Being public, these events extend our reach to the department and beyond and touch upon subjects extending from work-life balance to navigating career paths and acquiring technical skills.
2. **General meetings:** We hold general meetings with everyone, who is actively involved in the program, i.e.: the INSPIRA team, mentors, and mentees. These meetings provide an opportunity to receive feedback on the program's progress, identify areas of success, and challenges, and gather suggestions for improvements.
3. **Mentee's meetings:** We organize meetings only with mentees, to understand how the program is progressing. These meetings are separate from those with mentors to ensure mentees feel comfortable expressing themselves and providing feedback.
4. **Mentor's meetings:** Mentor meetings are also conducted separately from mentee meetings to ensure that mentors have the same opportunity as mentees to discuss the relationships they are forming and provide feedback openly.

Besides these events and activities, the mentor-mentee dyads define their own activities, which they define according to the mentee's needs and carry out throughout the year.

Mentoring cycles and matching

The INSPIRA team regularly receives applications from both mentees and mentors. Applicants are asked about their motivations to engage with the program, the goals they hope to achieve, and the characteristics they seek in a mentor or mentee. Matches

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[1] Please note that in this context more experienced refers to a specific skill, not age.

are made based on the analysis of the responses of the applications. Each mentoring cycle lasts throughout the academic year.

Being a mentor does not hinge on holding a senior position, it is rather about having experience and a desire to support others and being committed to sharing insights and supporting the professional and academic growth of mentees, regardless of academic year, contract type, or status.

How the program communicates and shares content

The program has a website, an Instagram account, and a YouTube channel. More recently we also created a LinkedIn profile. The INSPIRA **website** provides information on the program's goals and becoming a mentor or mentee, shares experiences related to gender issues in academia, and highlights ongoing projects and achievements. The **Instagram** account strives to offer a mix of inspiration and information. The feed covers everything from key women in tech to explaining how the INSPIRA program works and announcing events. The Instagram account also shares statistics about women in the tech field to underline the importance of our mission, and answer recurrent questions, to foster an active dialogue with our students' community. There's always a snippet of our events as well. The **YouTube** channel features testimonials from industry and academia, showcasing female talent in Informatics and offering valuable insight into the possible career trajectories in the tech field. It also provides snippets from some of our previous events. Currently, we are working on more content that we haven't yet been able to finish because of balancing INSPIRA together with our other duties.