

## Tutoring and Mentoring – Vital Tools in Fostering Equity, Quality, and Inclusion in Higher Education

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### Abstract

Tutoring and mentoring have become central pillars of inclusive and equitable higher education systems worldwide, particularly as universities confront increasing diversification, massification, and persistent structural inequalities. Although their historical roots extend back to classical tutorial traditions, contemporary tutoring and mentoring practices have evolved into sophisticated academic and psychosocial support mechanisms aligned with student-centered pedagogies, institutional inclusivity goals, and global policy frameworks such as UNESCO's Education 2030 agenda. This article presents a theoretical integrative review offering a comprehensive understanding of the two concepts and their implications in fostering equity and quality within higher education. Drawing on national and international literature, the article traces how tutoring and mentoring support academic success, psychosocial well-being, professional development, and student belonging. A major focus is placed on the relationship between tutoring, mentoring, and quality inclusive education, emphasising international policy contexts and empirical findings on relational pedagogy, equity of access, and disparities linked to private tutoring ("shadow education"). The paper proposes a conceptual framework that situates tutoring and mentoring as relational, pedagogical, and structural interventions necessary for building equitable, student-centered, and socially just higher education systems.

**Keywords:** *tutoring, mentoring, inclusive university education, teacher–student relationships, student's success, shadow education*

### 1. Introduction

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In recent decades, higher education (HE) systems around the world have undergone profound transformations. Educational organizations now operate in increasingly diverse and complex environments characterized by massification, globalization, widening participation policies, digitalization, and shifting labor market expectations. Alongside these structural changes, student populations have become more heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, prior educational experience, learning needs, academic preparation, and psychosocial profiles. As a result, universities face more pressure to provide equitable access, enhance student success, support diverse learners, and reduce persistent achievement gaps. Against this backdrop, tutoring and mentoring have re-emerged as critical institutional tools capable of strengthening academic integration, fostering belonging, and promoting inclusive learning environments aligned with global quality frameworks.

Educational inclusion is more than just a goal of educational and social policies; it is a vital part of educational organizations that uphold and exemplify the values and principles of an inclusive culture. This involves being supportive and open to the unconditional acceptance of others, which is demonstrated through the behavior of every member of the educational community. Every year, new generations of learners enter higher education institutions and undergo a process of adaptation to the specific requirements of the student status-role, as well as to the functional and cultural characteristics of the organisation in which they are enrolled. The final effect of the adaptation process is the experience of being a member of that community, which includes the feeling of belonging and the desire to be involved in activities specific to this status role, with obviously positive effects on academic performance.

The student's transition process from being an out-group individual to being an in-group can be facilitated by tutoring and mentoring approaches, especially in cases where the student fails spontaneously, for various reasons (previous negative experiences of adapting to new groups, poorly developed socio-emotional skills, negative self-image, low self-esteem, different culture, specific habitus, etc.) to internalize and demonstrate how to be appropriate to the new social environment. This transition into university life

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constitutes, in fact, a process of resocialization for newly enrolled students, implying multiple challenges: adapting to their specific study programs, understanding and internalizing the rules of academic life, and fulfilling their responsibilities as students. Additionally, students must navigate their new status while interacting with peers, faculty, and administrative staff. These difficulties are often more pronounced for students who come from educational, family, social, or economic backgrounds that differ from the majority, as well as for those with atypical development profiles. In the case of these students, tutoring and mentoring services contribute essentially to ensuring university educational inclusion.

In current HE settings, tutoring and mentoring are no longer marginal or supplementary interventions; instead, they increasingly represent foundational elements of student support ecosystems. Their significance is amplified by research demonstrating the centrality of teacher–student and peer relationships in influencing student engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) underline that positive relational dynamics in university settings have profound effects on students’ sense of belonging, perceived support, and academic persistence, yet remain under-researched compared to primary and secondary education. In this respect, mentoring relationships serve as intentional, structured spaces within which relational trust, guidance, and academic confidence can develop. Recent global developments further highlight the necessity of institutionalized tutoring and mentoring systems. The rapid expansion of private tutoring markets—commonly referred to as shadow education—exacerbates social inequalities, as access is strongly mediated by socioeconomic status (Byun et al., 2018; Benz, 2024). This raises urgent questions about equity: if universities do not offer accessible academic support, the burden falls on families, thereby reproducing privilege and disadvantaging underrepresented groups. Institutional tutoring and mentoring counteract this tendency by providing universal, free, or low-cost academic and psychosocial support embedded within higher education structures. Parallel to global trends, regional developments also contribute to the expanding significance of tutoring. Ciuchi (2023) documents the emergence of structured tutoring programs in Romania, highlighting how national

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educational reforms increasingly recognize tutoring as a mechanism for promoting student success, retention, and equity. Similar expansions can be seen across Europe, Asia, and North America, where mentoring networks, peer tutoring systems, learning centers, and near-peer academic coaching initiatives have multiplied. These developments align with UNESCO's (2017) emphasis on equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education as a universal objective under Sustainable Development Goal 4.

## **2. Paper's purpose**

Despite these developments, the literature on tutoring and mentoring in HE remains fragmented across multiple domains—psychology, sociology, pedagogy, academic development, and educational policy. Many studies focus on specific models (e.g., peer tutoring, near-peer mentoring), while others examine psychosocial dynamics, identity formation, or academic outcomes. Few contributions attempt to integrate these strands into a comprehensive conceptual framework capable of explaining how tutoring and mentoring contribute holistically to equity, quality, and inclusion in HE. This article aims to fill this gap through an extensive theoretical and integrative review. Therefore, the article pursues three interrelated objectives:

- to provide a comprehensive understanding of the concepts of tutoring and mentoring in HE, based on historical origins, international policy frameworks, relational dimensions, and global disparities such as shadow education.
- to develop an integrative conceptual framework illustrating how tutoring and mentoring serve as academic, relational, and structural interventions that foster inclusive and equitable higher education systems.
- to examine limitations and implications for further research.

The paper offers a theoretical and integrative review, drawing on conceptual, empirical, and policy-oriented literature. Rather than conducting a systematic review, we intended to synthesise multidisciplinary evidence to construct a coherent conceptual understanding of tutoring and mentoring as mechanisms for inclusive

and equitable higher education. The method follows Torracco's (2016) framework for integrative literature reviews, emphasising synthesis, critique, conceptual advancement, and theoretical contribution.

### **3. Understanding the concepts of tutoring and mentoring in HE**

The idea of support, assistance is the basic meaning for the concept of tutoring and its associated terms - mentoring, coaching, counselling. Etymologically, the term "tutoring" in Romanian language, comes from the French language, namely the verb "tuteurer", which is derived from the Latin word "tutor", meaning "protector", "guide", "supervisor", and this, in turn, from the Latin verb "tueri", which means "to watch", "to protect" or "to guard"(DEX). Therefore, the meaning of tutoring is related to the action of supervising, providing protection, or guidance. In the current context, the meaning, both in Romania and worldwide, is the action of guidance or assistance offered by a more competent (or experienced) person to another person (usually a child or young person, or novice in a field) to help them develop or learn.

Tutoring, as an educational strategy, has been mentioned since antiquity, in the context of describing forms of education, especially for children from higher social categories, in Greece, Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia or even ancient China (Szuba, 2020; Alesksandrovna S.C, 2015). Tutors were often slaves (in ancient Greece they were called paidagogos), or other categories of people with a certain level of education/skills who provided (for a fee) educational activities in an individualised format, usually involving a single tutored child, or in small groups. (idem). The most disseminated in today's practice tutoring/mentoring strategy from Ancient Greece is the Socratic dialogue modelled as an inquiry-based form of guided learning where knowledge was co-constructed through questioning, reflection, and dialogue. This personalised, dialogic mode of instruction laid the conceptual groundwork for tutoring as a relational and cognitive apprenticeship.

The medieval university system further institutionalised tutoring by formalising the master-apprentice relationship. Students lived, worked, and studied under the supervision of a master who provided

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individualised academic and sometimes moral guidance. With the rise of the modern university in Europe, particularly the Oxford and Cambridge education model (known as the Oxbridge model), tutoring became a distinctive pedagogical practice emphasising one-on-one and small-group instruction, frequent intellectual dialogue, and personal academic mentorship. Chelnokova et al. (2015) argue that this system shaped global perceptions of tutoring as a premium form of elite academic support, characterised by close academic relationships, continuous feedback, and individualised intellectual development. While the Oxbridge tutorial system remains influential, contemporary tutoring has diverged significantly from its historical antecedents due to massification, democratisation, and technological transformations in higher education. Today's tutoring systems encompass a broad spectrum of institutionalised support structures—peer tutoring, writing centers, supplemental instruction, learning development programs, and mentoring networks—designed to serve large and diverse student populations. Nevertheless, the historical foundation underscores that the principles of relational learning, individualised attention, and dialogic engagement remain central to modern tutoring practices.

In contemporary times, the concept of education has taken on various meanings, all focused on the development of children and youth, but in nuanced ways. For instance, among the general population globally, including in Romania, the term is often associated with private tutoring, particularly in pre-university education (Ciuchi, 2023). This phenomenon, known as "shadow education," has significant implications for educational equity and the goal of providing inclusive, quality education for all students.

In today's university environment, tutoring is still recognised as an educational strategy, but its role has evolved. It no longer primarily serves a direct instructional purpose, which is now largely fulfilled by courses, seminars, and laboratories. Instead, tutoring mainly focuses on supporting students' adaptation to university life and enhancing the overall educational experience through personalised interventions. These interventions aim to address various aspects of student development, including administrative, organisational, and personal-social dimensions (Veiga Simão, Flores, Fernandes & Figueira, 2008),

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and they are complemented by mentoring strategies, especially in professional practice contexts.

Modern conceptions of tutoring in HE capture tutoring as a holistic process that transcends mere academic remediation. Four major conceptual dimensions emerge from contemporary research:

- academic support and cognitive scaffolding – helping students acquire knowledge, understand complex ideas, and develop study strategies;

- personal development and psychosocial support – boosting self-esteem, motivation, and confidence;

- institutional integration – helping students navigate academic systems, expectations, and resources;

- professional and career development – guiding students' aspirational, disciplinary, and career pathways.

These dimensions illustrate that tutoring in higher education is not only about helping students learn content, but also about enabling them to thrive as autonomous learners, engaged members of the academic community, and emerging professionals.

Mentoring in higher education was portrayed as a complementary but distinct practice from tutoring. Crisp and Cruz (2009) conducted a foundational literature review of mentoring research between 1990 and 2007, identifying four core functions of mentoring: psychosocial support (emotional validation, encouragement), academic support, goal-setting and career guidance, and role modelling. Although tutoring and mentoring tend to overlap, mentoring is generally broader, longer-term, and grounded in developmental relationships rather than content-centred instruction. In contemporary universities, mentoring includes first-year transition programs, faculty–student mentoring, peer mentor schemes, and professional mentoring initiatives in various disciplines (Lunsford, Crisp, Dolan & Wuetherick, 2017). Mentoring is increasingly recognised as a vehicle for equity and inclusion, particularly for marginalised or underrepresented students. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) emphasise the strong association between high-quality teacher–student relationships and students' academic engagement, belonging, and overall well-being. Since mentoring is fundamentally relational, it provides structured opportunities for developing the

positive interpersonal connections essential to student success. (Sutter & Francis, 2022).

#### **4. The role of tutoring and mentoring in fostering quality inclusive education in universities**

Quality inclusive education has become a defining paradigm within global higher education reforms. At the policy level, frameworks such as UNESCO's *Education 2030* agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) articulate a clear vision: education must be inclusive, equitable, and of high quality for all learners (UNESCO, 2017). Inclusion is no longer confined to the integration of students with disabilities or special educational needs; it encompasses a systemic and institutional commitment to removing barriers and ensuring that all students—regardless of background, identity, or circumstance—can participate meaningfully in learning and achieve their potential. This shift reframes inclusive education as both a moral imperative and a pedagogical necessity. (Wang, Liu, & Tu, 2025). Ainscow (2020) emphasises that inclusive education should be understood not as a remedial response to individual deficits but as a transformative approach to structuring educational environments. This requires revisiting institutional cultures, pedagogical practices, assessment policies, and support systems. Higher education institutions must therefore cultivate cultures of belonging, responsiveness, and equity, where diversity is valued as an asset rather than perceived as a challenge. (Ciff & Brady, 2025). Within this new philosophy, inclusive pedagogies aim to create learning environments where all students can engage, succeed, and feel valued. Hockings (2010) identifies key principles of inclusive learning and teaching that universities should adopt: flexibility in curriculum design, accessible learning materials, differentiated teaching approaches, recognition of diverse cultural and linguistic identities, and encouragement of collaborative and dialogic learning. These principles align closely with tutoring and mentoring strategies, which inherently adopt personalised and relational approaches that support students' diverse academic and psychosocial



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needs. Also, tutoring and mentoring extend the reach of Universal Design for Learning by providing personalised support that complements flexible instructional design. For example, peer tutoring can offer alternative explanations or culturally relevant examples, and mentors can help students choose methods of demonstrating learning that align with their strengths. Where possible, tutoring centres can provide multimodal learning materials aligned with UDL principles (Universell/NTNU, HOWEST (SIHO), AHEAD, 2017). Thus, tutoring and mentoring serve as pedagogical extensions of UDL, making inclusive course design more effective and accessible.

Beyond curriculum and teaching strategies, inclusive education relies heavily on relational dimensions—particularly the quality of teacher–student and peer relationships. Hagenauer and Volet’s (2014) study demonstrates that relationality in higher education is a critical yet often overlooked component of student success. Students’ emotional experiences, trust in instructors, and sense of interpersonal connection significantly affect their engagement, motivation, and academic persistence. Also, Tinto (2017) identifies belonging as a fundamental factor influencing student retention. Belonging is not merely affective but encompasses academic integration, identity validation, and recognition within the university community. Mentoring and tutoring directly support the development of belonging by offering consistent personal contact, providing individualised encouragement and validation, helping students articulate academic and career goals, and ensuring that students feel “seen” and supported within the institution. These relational benefits align closely with the goals of inclusive education by fostering environments where all students can participate as valued members of the academic community.

Despite global commitments to equity and inclusion, higher education remains shaped by structural inequalities related to socioeconomic status, race, language, disability, and migration background. Studies in the sociology of education reveal persistent disparities in access, performance, and completion. These inequities are intensified by disparities in access to private tutoring, or shadow education. Byun et al. (2018) show that participation in private

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tutoring is heavily stratified, with students from affluent families far more likely to access supplementary academic support. Similarly, Benz (2024) demonstrates that regional variations in private tutoring participation reflect systemic educational inequalities: in systems with high-stakes testing and strong market pressures, private tutoring becomes a mechanism of competitive advantage. Universities cannot control external shadow education markets, but they can counterbalance inequities by providing institutional tutoring and mentoring that are freely accessible, well-structured, culturally responsive and academically rigorous. (Kraft, M. A., & Falken, G. T. , 2021; Negrea & Gartland, 2025). In doing so, universities promote equitable opportunity for academic success, particularly for students lacking the financial means to purchase private tutoring. Ciuchi (2023) also notes that in Romania, formal tutoring initiatives are increasingly recognised as crucial components of equitable education, supporting students who might otherwise be excluded from private tutoring markets. Thus, institutional tutoring and mentoring serve as equity mechanisms that aim to democratise academic support.

Another key aspect that supports the idea of tutoring and mentoring as vital tools for inclusive and quality higher education is the student-centred learning approach, where students are positioned as active agents in their educational journeys. Mentoring and tutoring facilitate this approach by guiding students in setting their own academic goals, developing metacognitive skills, supporting self-efficacy, and offering feedback and reflective opportunities. These practices empower students to become self-directed learners and contribute to inclusive learning environments where diverse strengths and pathways are acknowledged. (Nuis, W., Segers, M., Beausaert, S., 2023). Also, inclusive education that is student-centred demands assessment practices that recognise diverse forms of knowledge and expression. Summative assessments often privilege students with strong linguistic, analytical, or test-taking skills. Tutoring plays a crucial role in the assessment process by helping students understand assignment expectations, prepare for oral and practical exams, and engage in self-assessment and reflection. Additionally, mentoring offers support related to academic integrity, aligning long-term goals, managing assessment anxiety, and constructively interpreting

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feedback. Together, tutoring and mentoring promote assessment literacy, an essential but often overlooked aspect of academic success. (Hoffman et. all, 2019; Holmes, 2025).

Last but not least, tutoring and mentoring serve as concrete mechanisms through which universities enact their commitments to equity and inclusion. Inclusive education is not merely a set of pedagogical techniques; it is an institutional ethos rooted in values of respect, justice, empathy, and collaboration. Different types of tutoring (peer-tutoring, group-tutoring, etc.), and mentoring embody these values in practice through cultivating learning communities, supporting diverse life experiences, creating spaces for dialogue and reflection, empowering marginalised voices, and fostering equitable pathways to success. (Alhassan, Christensen, Solheim, & Mellemsether, 2025; Folostina, Zavada, Saghin, Iancu, 2024).

Across various theories related to tutoring and mentoring, several unifying themes provide a strong foundation for understanding their importance in promoting equitable, inclusive, and high-quality higher education. From the perspective of social constructivism (as proposed by Vygotsky), learning is fundamentally a social process. This viewpoint suggests that tutoring offers relational support, while mentoring fosters active meaning-making. According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory, building confidence is crucial; thus, both tutoring and mentoring aim to enhance self-efficacy. Vincent Tinto's model (2017) identifies academic and social integration as key predictors of student persistence, emphasising that a sense of belonging is critical for academic success. Consequently, mentoring plays a significant role in strengthening social integration. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory situates learning within interconnected systems—individual, relational, institutional, and societal. This framework highlights tutoring and mentoring as ecological supports that function at multiple levels:

- Microsystem: offering direct interactions between tutors and students;
- Mesosystem: referring to the interactions among peers, mentors, and faculty;

- Exosystem implies institutional policies and services; and
- Macrosystem constructed by the cultural norms and socioeconomic inequalities.

The multilevel impact of tutoring and mentoring illustrates why they are powerful tools for fostering inclusive education.

### **5. Implications for Future Research**

Although research on tutoring, mentoring, and inclusive education is expanding, several gaps remain. There is an evident need for longitudinal studies, because most studies capture short-term effects. Long-term research could provide insights into sustained academic outcomes, professional identity trajectories and long-term confidence and belonging. Also, certain geographical contexts are underrepresented. Romania and Eastern Europe, for example, remain underrepresented in mentoring research. Ciuchi (2023) offers a valuable contribution, but further comparative studies are needed. Another gap highlighted by Hagenauer and Volet (2014) is the lack of research on relational quality and medium. This gap remains significant, especially concerning cultural diversity and digital learning environments. COVID-19 accelerated transitions to online support, yet research on the long-term effects of digital tutoring and mentoring is limited. Additionally, the expansion of private tutoring markets necessitates a deeper examination of how institutional tutoring can mitigate inequitable access to learning support, both at the pre-university and university levels.

### **6. Conclusion**

Historically rooted in ancient and medieval educational traditions, tutoring and mentoring have adapted to the demands of contemporary higher education. Today, they align with global policy frameworks—particularly UNESCO’s Education 2030 agenda—that position inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education as non-negotiable global priorities. Inclusive education is not achievable solely through curriculum and teaching practices; it requires robust support structures that ensure all students, regardless of their background, have equitable

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access to learning opportunities. Tutoring and mentoring systems provide precisely this type of structural support.

The literature consistently highlights the relational dimensions of tutoring and mentoring as central to their effectiveness. Whether through peer, near-peer, or faculty-based models, these practices create the interpersonal connections necessary for students to feel valued and integrated within the academic community. Empirical work by Hagenauer and Volet (2014) shows how teacher–student relationships profoundly influence motivation, engagement, and retention. Meanwhile, theoretical frameworks such as Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and Bandura’s self-efficacy theory illuminate why guided interactions with more knowledgeable others catalyze cognitive and emotional development. Collectively, relational pedagogy forms the foundation of inclusive, student-centered learning environments. Theoretical insights from Tinto’s retention model, social constructivism, and ecological systems theory further affirm the multifaceted nature of tutoring and mentoring. These practices operate simultaneously at the cognitive, relational, institutional, and systemic levels, making them uniquely powerful tools for addressing the persistent challenges of higher education.

Despite extensive evidence supporting the importance of tutoring and mentoring, significant work remains to be done. Institutions must develop coherent policies, invest in tutor and mentor training, and embed tutoring and mentoring into broader equity and inclusion strategies. Policymakers should incorporate tutoring and mentoring into quality assurance frameworks and provide stable funding streams that support their long-term implementation. Researchers must address gaps in the literature, particularly in understudied regions and digital learning environments, and continue examining how tutoring can mitigate inequities exacerbated by socioeconomic disparities.

In conclusion, tutoring and mentoring are essential mechanisms for advancing equity, inclusion, and high-quality learning in higher education. They embody the relational, pedagogical, and structural commitments required for universities to fulfill their social mission in the 21st century. Far from being peripheral supports, tutoring and mentoring represent core elements of an equitable and

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inclusive academic ecosystem—one that empowers students not only to succeed academically but also to thrive as engaged, confident, and fulfilled learners.

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