

Fostering Student Success Through Peer Mentoring: Understanding Student Mentors' Motivations

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Abstract— Student success and the reduction of dropout rates have become central concerns in higher education systems worldwide, prompting institutions to develop structured, evidence-based support programmes aimed at addressing students' academic, social and emotional needs, particularly during the first year of study. Peer mentoring programmes, grounded in social learning theory and student engagement frameworks, have been widely recognised as effective mechanisms for facilitating student integration and persistence. This qualitative study examines the motivations of student mentors participating in an institutional peer mentoring programme implemented at a Portuguese higher education institution. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire completed by 274 students who voluntarily applied to act as mentors. The analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach, resulting in the identification of four interconnected motivational dimensions: altruism and the desire to give back; promotion of academic, social and local integration; personal, academic and professional development of mentors; and the perceived role of mentoring in preventing academic failure and dropout. The findings reveal that student mentors' motivations are strongly shaped by their own transitional experiences, a sense of social responsibility and recognition of mentoring as a meaningful learning opportunity. The study reinforces the relevance of peer mentoring as a holistic institutional strategy for promoting student success, inclusion and well-being in higher education.

Keywords— Higher Education; Peer Mentoring; Student Motivations; Student Persistence; Student Success.

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition to higher education constitutes a critical period in students' academic trajectories, often characterised by significant cognitive, emotional and social demands. Students entering higher education are required to adapt to new pedagogical models, increased academic autonomy and unfamiliar assessment practices, while simultaneously renegotiating social identities, support networks and expectations regarding their academic futures. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that difficulties encountered during this transitional phase are closely associated with academic underperformance, psychological distress and increased risk of dropout (Eather et al., 2022).

Early theoretical contributions to the study of student persistence, particularly Tinto's Student Integration Model, emphasised the central role of academic and social integration in shaping students' decisions to remain in higher education or dropout (Tinto, 1975). According to this model, students' sense of belonging, engagement with peers, and alignment with institutional norms interact with academic performance influencing persistence. Subsequent research has reinforced the relevance of this framework, highlighting that integration is a multidimensional process involving academic, social, emotional and, increasingly, contextual factors such as geographic displacement and cultural adaptation (Reis & Yu, 2018; Thornton et al., 2024).

While student agency and individual coping strategies are important, the literature increasingly recognises that successful adaptation to higher education cannot be

understood solely as an individual responsibility. Institutional policies, structures and support programmes play a decisive role in shaping students' experiences and outcomes (Astin, 1999; Eather et al., 2022). In response, higher education institutions have implemented a wide range of initiatives aimed at fostering engagement, inclusion and persistence, including guiding programmes, academic counseling, tutoring and mentoring.

Among these initiatives, peer mentoring programmes have gained prominence due to their relational nature and their capacity to address academic, social and emotional dimensions, simultaneously. Rooted in social learning theory (Bandura, 1969), peer mentoring capitalises on shared experiences and horizontal relationships between students, enabling learning through modelling, dialogue and mutual identification. Research indicates that peer mentoring contributes to improved academic performance, enhanced well-being, increased social capital and stronger institutional attachment among first-year students (Boyce et al., 2025; Matutes et al., 2024).

Mentoring relationships in higher education are fundamentally developmental and learner-centred, fostering academic, social, personal, identity-related, cultural and career-oriented learning through intentional and sustained interactions. These relationships evolve over time, becoming increasingly reciprocal and mutually beneficial, while remaining responsive to mentees' changing needs, mentors' expertise and the identities of all participants (Moore et al., 2024; Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2023).

Such characteristics position mentoring as a fundamentally relational practice in higher education. Importantly, peer mentoring is increasingly conceptualised as a reciprocal process, generating benefits not only for mentees but also for mentors.

In this sense, rather than constituting a single dyadic interaction, mentoring operates within a broader constellation of relationships that collectively support students' learning, development and sense of belonging within higher education institutions. This relational perspective reinforces the understanding of mentoring as embedded within institutional environments that actively promote connection, engagement and inclusion (American Council on Education [ACE], 2022).

Participation as a mentor has been associated with the development of transversal competencies, increased civic engagement and enhanced employability (Hayman et al., 2022; Seery et al., 2021). Despite this growing body of evidence, limited attention has been paid to the motivations that lead students to volunteer as mentors within formal institutional programmes. Understanding these motivations is essential for the design, sustainability and effectiveness of peer mentoring initiatives.

II. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: THE PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME

The present study was conducted within the framework of the Observatory for Academic Success (OPSA 2.0), an institutional project developed at a Portuguese higher education institution with the explicit aim of promoting student success and preventing academic failure and dropout. OPSA 2.0 adopts a holistic and integrated approach, structured around seven strategic axes addressing academic performance, well-being, inclusion and student engagement (Mangas & Monteiro, 2024).

One of these axes is dedicated to a Peer Mentoring Programme specifically designed to support first-year students enrolled in professional higher technical programmes and bachelor's degrees. The programme was formally established through the Regulation of the Mentoring Programme of IPLeiria (Regulation No. 947/2024, of 22 of August), published in the Official Journal of the Portuguese Republic, which defines the normative and operational framework of the programme. Its first edition was formally authorised by IPLeiria Presidential Order No. 231/2024, enabling its effective implementation during the 2024/2025 academic year across the institution's five schools. In the current academic year (2025/2026), the programme is being implemented for the second time,

following a new formal opening authorised by institutional Presidential Order No. 252/2025, and continues to operate across all schools of the institution.

Participation in the programme is voluntary for both mentors and mentees. Mentors are students enrolled in more advanced stages of their academic programmes who commit to accompanying first-year students over the course of an academic year. Mentoring relationships may be individual or organised in small groups and encompass academic guidance, social integration and emotional support.

To ensure the quality and consistency of mentoring practices, the programme includes structured training sessions for mentors. These training activities focus on the development of transversal skills such as communication, active listening, constructive feedback and collaborative problem-solving, in line with recommendations from the literature on effective peer mentoring (Hayman et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2025). Participation as a mentor is formally recognised through institutional certification and inclusion in the Diploma Supplement, reinforcing the programme's educational and professional relevance.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an exploratory and descriptive orientation. The exploratory nature of the study reflects the relative scarcity of research specifically addressing student mentors' motivations within structured institutional mentoring programmes. The descriptive dimension aims to identify and characterise these motivations based on participants' own narratives, without imposing predefined analytical categories. The research is grounded in an interpretative paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through individuals' meanings, experiences and interactions. From this perspective, understanding student mentors' motivations requires attention to their subjective interpretations of past experiences, institutional contexts and anticipated benefits (Cohen et al., 2018; Fortin et al., 2021).

Given the relational nature of peer mentoring, a brief characterisation of the mentors' context is provided in order to contextualise mentors' narratives and motivations.

B. Participants: Profile of Student Mentors

A total of 274 students volunteered to participate as mentors in the Peer Mentoring Programme and completed the initial questionnaire. All participants were enrolled in the institution at the time of data collection and were attending more advanced stages of their academic programmes, which enabled them to support first-year students through peer mentoring.

The mentors were drawn from all schools of the institution, reflecting its organisational and academic diversity (Figure 1). A substantial proportion of participants were enrolled in the School of Technology and Management (ESTG), which constitutes the largest campus of the institution and has historically recorded higher levels of academic failure and dropout. The strong representation of students from this school may therefore reflect an increased awareness of academic challenges and a heightened recognition of the relevance of structured peer support mechanisms.

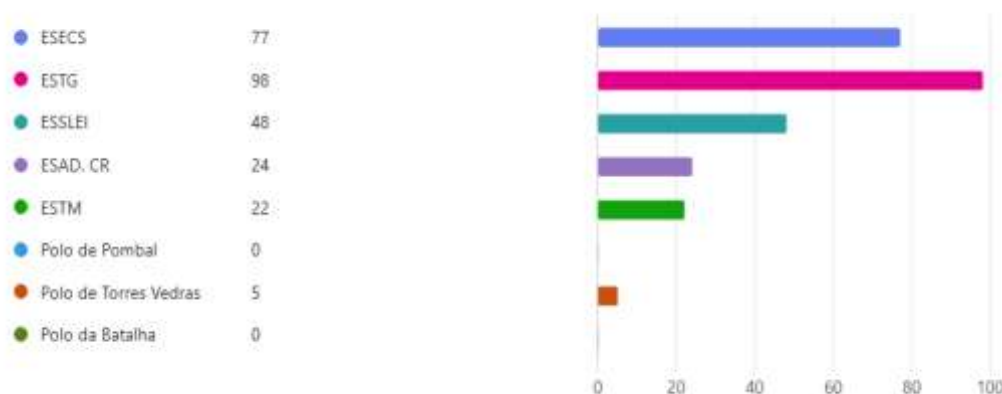


Fig. 1 Distribution of mentors by school

The remaining participants were distributed across the other schools of the institution, including the School of Education and Social Sciences (ESECS), health (ESSLei), arts and design (ESAD), and tourism and marine technologies (ESTM), as well as a small number of students attending programmes offered at satellite campuses. This distribution reinforces the institutional scope of the programme and the heterogeneity of mentors' academic backgrounds.

Regarding the cycle of studies, most mentors were enrolled in bachelor's degree programmes, followed by a smaller group of master's students and a limited number of students attending Higher Professional Technical Courses (CTeSP) (Figure 2). Although less represented, the presence of students from different cycles of study highlights the plurality of academic trajectories within the mentoring programme and suggests that peer support is valued across distinct forms of higher education provision. A small number of participants were attending isolated curricular units, illustrating the existence of non-linear academic pathways among mentors.



Fig. 2 Distribution of mentors by academic level

Geographic origin and mobility emerged as salient characteristics of the mentor population. Although mentors originated from a wide range of regions, covering most districts of the country as well as the Autonomous Regions of Azores and Madeira, many were residing in the district where the institution is located during the academic year. This discrepancy between place of origin and place of residence indicates that a significant proportion of mentors are geographically displaced students. Having experienced relocation and adaptation to a new territorial and social context themselves,

these mentors bring first-hand knowledge of the challenges associated with geographic mobility in higher education.

In addition, the mentor group included a minority of international students from different national backgrounds. While numerically less expressive, their presence contributes to the cultural diversity of the mentoring programme and highlights the role of peer mentoring as a space for intercultural exchange and inclusion. Importantly, international students are not positioned solely as recipients of institutional support, but also as active agents of integration, drawing on their own academic and cultural experiences to support others.

Most participants reported no prior experience as peer mentors. This finding suggests that their engagement in the programme is not primarily driven by previous formal mentoring roles, but rather by their lived experiences during the transition to higher education. Taken together, these characteristics portray mentors as students with diverse academic trajectories and territorial backgrounds, whose experiential knowledge of adaptation, integration and academic challenge provides a meaningful foundation for their involvement in peer mentoring.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected during the 2024/2025 academic year through an online questionnaire administered to all students who expressed interest in participating as mentors in the Peer Mentoring Programme.

The questionnaire fulfilled a dual function: it served as a formal expression of interest in participating in the programme and as a data collection instrument for research purposes. In addition to socio-demographic and academic information, the questionnaire included open-ended questions inviting participants to explain their motivations for volunteering as mentors. This study focuses exclusively on the qualitative data derived from these open-ended responses.

The qualitative data were analysed using content analysis, following the systematic procedures proposed by Bardin (2013) and subsequently reaffirmed in educational research contexts (Amado, 2020). After corpus preparation and verification, an initial phase of floating reading was conducted to achieve familiarisation with the data and identify recurrent themes.

Through iterative cycles of coding, category refinement and consolidation, a stable and conceptually coherent thematic structure was developed. Categories and subcategories were defined to ensure exhaustive coverage of the motivations expressed across the dataset. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate each category, ensuring interpretative depth and alignment with the existing literature.

IV. FINDINGS: STUDENT MENTORS' MOTIVATIONAL DIMENSIONS

The qualitative content analysis resulted in four overarching motivational dimensions, encompassing altruistic orientations, integration-focused support, personal and professional development, and the prevention of academic failure and dropout. Each dimension comprises several interrelated subthemes that reflect the complexity of student mentors' motivations. Table 1 synthesises these dimensions by presenting their thematic foci, analytical interpretations and illustrative semantic indicators.

TABLE I MOTIVATIONAL DIMENSIONS UNDERLYING STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN PEER MENTORING

Motivational Dimension	Thematic Focus	Analytical Interpretation	Illustrative Semantic Indicators
Altruism and Social Responsibility	Desire to support peers	Mentoring is perceived as an active form of peer support, driven by the intention to assist	helping, supporting, guiding, being

		others in navigating academic and personal challenges.	available, making a difference
	Empathy grounded in personal experience	Motivation emerges from mentors' own experiences of insecurity, loneliness or disorientation during their transition to higher education.	feeling lost, fear, uncertainty, "I was once in their place"
	Reciprocity and giving back	Mentoring is understood as a way of returning the support previously received from peers or the institution.	giving back, retributing support, doing for others what was done for me
Promotion of Academic, Social and Local Integration	Academic and institutional integration	Mentors support newcomers in understanding institutional structures, academic expectations and effective study strategies.	academic services, study methods, organisation, understanding the system
	Social and relational integration	Emphasis on fostering interpersonal relationships, a sense of belonging and reducing social isolation.	making friends, not feeling alone, academic community, belonging
	Local and territorial integration	Mentoring includes support in adapting to the host city or region, particularly relevant for displaced and international students.	adapting to the city, important places, feeling at home
Personal, Academic and Professional Development of the Mentor	Development of transversal skills	Mentoring is recognised as a context for developing soft skills relevant to academic life and future professional contexts.	communication, leadership, empathy, responsibility
	Academic and professional enhancement	Participation is perceived as enriching the academic trajectory and strengthening employability prospects.	curriculum value, diploma supplement, professional future
	Personal growth and self-realisation	Mentoring contributes to personal fulfilment, self-awareness and a sense of usefulness.	personal fulfilment, self-growth, feeling useful
Prevention of Academic Failure and Dropout	Support during critical transition periods	The first year is perceived as a sensitive phase that benefits from close and sustained peer support.	first months, difficult phase, adaptation
	Promotion of well-being and mental health	Emotional support is valued as a way of reducing anxiety, stress and vulnerability.	emotional support, mental health, anxiety, fear
	Encouraging resilience and persistence	Mentors aim to motivate students to persist, overcome difficulties and remain engaged in their academic pathways.	not giving up, persistence, academic success

Altruism emerged as the most prominent motivational dimension, with participants expressing a strong desire to help and support newly arrived students. Many mentors explicitly referred to their own experiences of uncertainty, anxiety and disorientation during the first year of higher education, positioning mentoring as a way of preventing others from experiencing similar difficulties.

This motivation was frequently articulated as a form of reciprocity, whereby mentors sought to “give back” the support they themselves had received from peers or institutional actors. Such findings are consistent with previous research highlighting altruism and social responsibility as central drivers of engagement in peer mentoring (Hayman et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2025). From a transformative learning perspective, this process can be understood as the reinterpretation of past challenges into purposeful action, fostering a shift in perspective and identity (Mezirow, 2000).

Beyond this dimension, which is strongly anchored in personal experience(s) and reciprocity, participants also demonstrated a broad understanding of the impact of mentoring on students’ integration processes.

Participants consistently emphasised mentoring as a mechanism for facilitating multiple dimensions of integration. Academic integration involves guidance on institutional procedures, curricular organisation and effective study strategies. Social integration was associated with fostering interpersonal relationships, reducing feelings of isolation and strengthening students’ sense of belonging to the academic community.

For students displaced from their home regions or countries, local integration also emerged as a salient aspect of mentoring. Mentors perceived their role as supporting adaptation to the host city, facilitating access to local resources and mitigating feelings of cultural and geographic dislocation. This multidimensional understanding of integration aligns with contemporary perspectives on student success, which emphasise the interdependence of academic, social and contextual factors (Gonçalves et al., 2025; Thornton et al., 2024).

Alongside the emphasis on supporting mentees, the narratives further reveal that participation in mentoring is perceived as a formative process for the mentors themselves.

Beyond altruistic motivations, mentors recognised their participation as a valuable opportunity for personal and professional development. Participants highlighted the acquisition of transversal skills, including communication, leadership, empathy, responsibility and time management. These competencies are widely recognised as critical for employability and lifelong learning (Sá & Serpa, 2018).

Formal institutional recognition of mentoring activities, particularly through certification and inclusion in the Diploma Supplement, further reinforced this motivation. Consistent with existing research, mentors perceived such recognition as legitimising their contribution and enhancing the value of mentoring within their academic and professional trajectories (Seery et al., 2021; Lima et al., 2025).

Finally, a more strategic dimension of mentoring emerges, albeit less prominent, related to the prevention of academic failure and dropout. Participants explicitly identified mentoring as a strategy for preventing academic failure and dropout. Mentors recognised the first year of higher education as a particularly vulnerable period and perceived their role as providing emotional support, encouragement and resilience-building during critical moments.

This preventive function aligns with research highlighting peer mentoring as an effective mechanism for mitigating dropout risk by promoting confidence, well-being and persistence (Boyce et al., 2025; Matutes et al., 2024). Participants’ emphasis on emotional support also reflects growing awareness of mental health and well-being as central components of student success (Carneiro & Rodrigues, 2025).

V. DISCUSSION

The present study provides an in-depth understanding of the motivations underlying students' voluntary engagement as peer mentors within an institutional mentoring programme, contributing to the growing body of literature on peer mentoring and student success in higher education. The findings reveal that mentors' motivations are complex, multidimensional and closely interwoven with their own academic trajectories, transitional experiences and perceptions of institutional responsibility.

The predominance of altruistic motivations aligns with previous studies that identify the desire to help others and contribute to the academic community as a central driver of engagement in peer mentoring initiatives (Hayman et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2025; Seery et al., 2021). In the present study, altruism is not expressed merely as a generic willingness to assist peers, but rather as a deeply reflective motivation grounded in mentors' own experiences of vulnerability, uncertainty and adaptation during the first year of higher education. This finding supports Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning, insofar as mentors reinterpret past challenges and convert them into purposeful, socially oriented action.

Closely related to altruism is the notion of reciprocity, whereby mentors seek to "give back" the support previously received from peers or institutional actors. This cycle of solidarity reinforces peer mentoring as a mechanism for strengthening social cohesion and shared responsibility within higher education institutions, echoing Carneiro and Rodrigues' (2025) assertion that mentoring contributes to the construction of more inclusive and supportive academic cultures. In this sense, mentoring transcends its instrumental function and becomes a form of civic engagement embedded within the academic experience.

The second major motivational dimension identified - supporting academic, social and local integration - reflects a holistic understanding of student success. Participants clearly articulated integration as a multifaceted process involving not only academic adjustment but also social belonging and adaptation to the surrounding territorial context. Such an understanding of mentoring aligns with relational perspectives that emphasise the role of relationship-rich environments in fostering engagement, belonging and meaningful learning in higher education (Felten & Lambert, 2020). The prominence attributed by mentors to local and territorial integration may be partly explained by the high prevalence of geographically displaced students within the institution. For many first-year students, adaptation to the host city represents an additional layer of transition, alongside academic and social adjustment, a challenge to which mentors appear particularly sensitive due to their own prior experiences. This perspective aligns with contemporary research that emphasises the interdependence of academic, social and contextual factors in shaping student persistence and well-being (Gonçalves et al., 2025; Thornton et al., 2024). The emphasis placed on local integration is particularly relevant in contexts characterised by student mobility, geographic displacement and increasing internationalisation, reinforcing the need for mentoring models that extend beyond purely academic support.

As illustrated in Figure 3, mentoring emerges as a distinct form of relationship embedded within relationship-rich environments, characterised by high relational depth, expressed through intentionality, reciprocity, trust and temporal continuity, and by the integration of multiple support functions, including academic, social, personal, cultural and career-related dimensions (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Within this framework, peer mentoring extends beyond general supportive contexts or isolated forms of assistance, functioning instead as a sustained and developmentally oriented relational practice. Between general supportive environments and full mentoring relationships, the model also recognises a wide range of developmentally significant relationships that provide

meaningful, though more limited, forms of support, often focused on specific academic or social domains. Although such relationships may not display the full relational intensity or functional breadth associated with mentoring, they nonetheless contribute substantially to students' academic engagement, psychosocial development and professional socialisation.

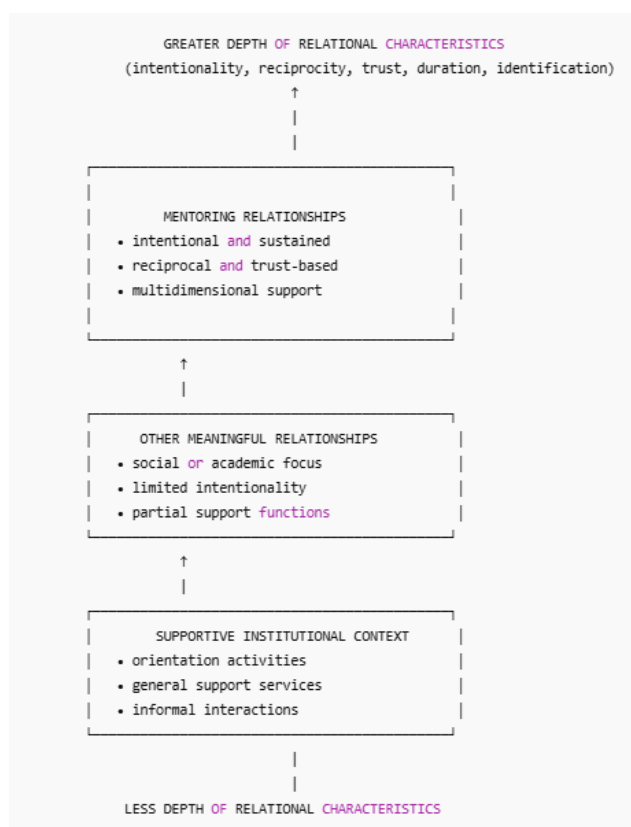


Fig.3 Conceptual adaptation based on Felten and Lambert's (2020) framework of relationship-rich education. Note. Conceptual adaptation based on Felten and Lambert's (2020) framework of relationship-rich education. The figure conceptualises mentoring as a high-depth, multi-functional relational form embedded within a broader supportive relational environment. Developmentally significant relationships occupy intermediate positions, while institutional programmes, networks and everyday interactions collectively constitute a supportive context for student integration and development.

This conceptualisation helps to explain why mentors in the present study emphasised local and territorial integration as a central aspect of their role, particularly in institutional contexts marked by student mobility, geographic displacement and increasing internationalisation. By situating mentoring within a broader relational ecology, the model highlights both the specificity of mentoring relationships and their dependence on wider institutional cultures that value and sustain relational engagement.

The findings further confirm that peer mentoring is perceived as a reciprocal learning process, offering substantial benefits to mentors themselves. Consistent with prior research, mentors recognised the development of transversal competencies—such as communication, leadership, empathy and responsibility—as a significant motivation for participation (Astin, 1999; Sá & Serpa, 2018). These competencies are increasingly valued

within both academic and professional contexts, reinforcing the positioning of peer mentoring as a pedagogical strategy that complements formal curricula. The institutional recognition of mentoring activities, particularly through certification and inclusion in the Diploma Supplement, emerged as a reinforcing factor, legitimising mentors' contributions and enhancing the perceived value of their engagement (Seery et al., 2021).

Although less prominent, the recognition of peer mentoring as a preventive strategy against academic failure and dropout constitutes a particularly significant finding. Extensive research has demonstrated that mentoring is associated with improved academic performance, increased persistence in higher education, enhanced personal development and a stronger sense of social responsibility among students (Crisp et al., 2017). Mentors demonstrated a clear awareness of the first year of higher education as a critical and vulnerable period, echoing long-standing theoretical and empirical evidence on student persistence (Tinto, 1975; Reis & Yu, 2018). By emphasising emotional support, encouragement and resilience-building, participants implicitly acknowledged the role of mentoring in promoting students' psychological well-being, an aspect increasingly recognised as central to academic success and retention (Carneiro & Rodrigues, 2025; Gonçalves et al., 2025).

Taken together, these findings position peer mentoring as a multifaceted institutional practice that simultaneously addresses individual development, social responsibility and structural challenges within higher education. Given the consistency and breadth of its documented benefits, peer mentoring may be understood not only as a supportive intervention but also as a high-impact educational practice, insofar as it amplifies the effects of other engagement-oriented strategies in higher education (Kuh, 2008). Understanding mentors' motivations is therefore crucial not only for sustaining mentoring programmes but also for aligning them with broader institutional strategies aimed at inclusion, equity and student success.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to explore the motivations that lead students to volunteer as peer mentors within an institutional mentoring programme implemented in a Portuguese higher education institution. By adopting a qualitative and interpretative approach, the research provides a nuanced understanding of mentors' perspectives, grounded in their lived experiences and contextualised within broader theoretical and empirical frameworks.

The findings demonstrate that student mentors' motivations can be organised into four interrelated dimensions: altruism and the desire to support peers; promotion of academic, social and local integration; personal, academic and professional development; and the perceived role of mentoring in preventing academic failure and dropout. These dimensions reflect a holistic conception of mentoring that extends beyond academic assistance to encompass emotional support, social inclusion and civic responsibility.

Altruism emerged as the most prominent motivational driver, closely linked to mentors' own transitional experiences and their desire to prevent new students from facing similar challenges. This motivation reinforces peer mentoring as a relational and ethically grounded practice, rooted in empathy, reciprocity and shared experience. At the same time, mentors clearly recognised the benefits of their participation for their own development, particularly in terms of transversal competencies and professional preparation, highlighting mentoring as a meaningful learning opportunity within higher education.

The study also underscores the relevance of peer mentoring as an institutional strategy for promoting student retention and well-being. Although preventing dropout was not the primary motivation for most mentors, participants demonstrated a heightened

awareness of their potential role in supporting students during critical moments of vulnerability. This finding reinforces the importance of integrating peer mentoring within broader institutional policies aimed at student success, mental health and inclusion.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that higher education institutions should actively recognise and support the motivations of student mentors by providing adequate training, formal recognition and ongoing institutional support. Such measures are essential for sustaining mentor engagement and ensuring the quality and effectiveness of mentoring programmes.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The findings are based on self-reported data from a single institution and focus exclusively on mentors' perspectives. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs, comparative institutional analyses and the inclusion of mentees' experiences to further explore the dynamics and outcomes of peer mentoring programmes.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing evidence base supporting peer mentoring as a powerful, inclusive and development-oriented practice in higher education. By foregrounding student mentors' motivations, it highlights the importance of recognising mentors not only as support providers but also as active agents of institutional change and student success.

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