Academic Mentors for Researchers at Risk
Short report from the session on academic mentoring
Inspireurope stakeholder forum, April 27th 2021

Academic mentors play an essential role in the support structure of researchers at risk by providing academic guidance, by helping them navigate challenges in their new academic environment, by opening academic and professional networks and by helping them prepare their next steps after the current placement. During the Inspireurope stakeholder forum April 26th-27th 2021 a workshop was arranged within the Inspireurope work package 5-preparing the work environment. The workshop was set up to foster exchange among academic mentors from across Europe, inviting them to discuss their expectations and experiences with regard to supporting researchers at risk. The workshop had 45 registered participants, 35 participated in the actual workshop.

The event was arranged as an interactive workshop where two experienced academic mentors and one mentee shared their personal experiences followed by discussions in breakout groups. The workshop ended with a joint discussion with all participants. Academic mentors with experience from hosting researchers at risk, new academic mentors as well as institutional contact persons for Scholars at Risk at higher education institutions participated in the workshop.

Speakers
- Dr. Jonthan Ngeh, visiting scholar and principal investigator at the Global South Studies Centre at the University of Cologne, and Philipp Schwartz Fellow.
- Prof. Ulrike Freitag, director of the Leibniz Moderner Orient and professor at the Freie Universität Berlin.
- Prof. Doris Jorde, head of the centre for professional learning at the University of Oslo.

The workshop was planned by Birgit Bujard, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Marit Egner, University of Oslo and Karolina Catoni, University of Gothenburg. The session was moderated by Karolina Catoni.

Survey
As a preparation of the workshop a survey for researchers at risk was set up and sent to 68 researchers who by then had registered for the conference. 63 responses were registered. Even though the respondents were not selected in a manner that is representative to all researchers at risk, the survey gives interesting information. See Appendix 1 for a full version of the survey including the comments from the researchers at risk. The result from the survey indicates that the majority of the responding scholars (70%) did get help from their mentors in integrating into the new academic environment at the host institution as well as help regarding questions related to the research project (51%). Only a third of the respondents did though get support in gaining external funding (30%), regaining academic self-confidence (35%), questions related to career development and funding opportunities (35%), networking outside the host institution (38%) or joint publications (27%). A few of the respondents indicated that they did not have any support from a mentor. When asking the researchers if there is anything else that the academic mentor should provide a scholar with, a few additional areas of support were mentioned: intensive language courses, understanding and respecting the past career of the scholar, increased support in career options outside of academia, orientation of the administrative plot, increased support in finding a permanent position and support in networking with scholars in the same field at other institutions but also with other departments within the hosting institutions. The survey also asked about the special conditions for scholars brought by the pandemic. The results shows that the pandemic has brought big difficulties for scholars integrating into the hosting environment, preventing

them to interact fully with the academic community and to network based on research interest. Among the challenges, networking with colleagues remotely seems to be the biggest challenge. Some respondents did though state that there was sufficient support online from mentors and colleagues.

Results from the discussions

Several mentors point out that the task to act as academic mentor for a researcher at risk is a difficult but very rewarding job. Mentoring is a combination of professional support and private engagement. It is important to be there to listen and to build a solid relationship with the scholar. During the first days of arrival (especially if arriving from the home country), it is important to be available and offer support, particularly on the personal side. A good start of a placement could be to identify mutual interest between the host and scholar. Co-teaching is also a good way to start a placement. Regaining academic self-confidence is seen as an important part of a placement. The support and mentoring must also be adapted to the individual need and the mental health status of the scholar. Loneliness is a huge challenge, amplified now by the global pandemic.

The mentors are also stressing the need for a sustainable, stable and systemized support-system building on existing structures of support for international staff and students. The need for support in post-traumatic stress was also discussed. In order to decrease the burden on the mentor and to give a better support for scholars, there is the suggestion to involve several mentors, either from the same department where they could act as a mentor-team or to also involve a second mentor from a different department than the hosting one. One mentor shared the good experience of also involving a student helper into the mentoring. Another suggestion is to pair the scholar with peers with similar interests/age etc. to cater for social integration. A junior scholar could for example be included in an international PhD-group. Integrating the scholar into a research group or for example an EU-funded project where everyone is new to the project was seen as a good way for integrating into the academic community. Creating a network of scholars could also be a way for increased support and sense of belonging for the scholar.

Integrating the scholar into research funding and considering joint applications for funding with the scholar was seen as yet another important task for the mentor. Support translation of work (including previous research) in order to receive recognition in Western journals was also mentioned as key. Some scholars may also have to shift research focus in order for the research to be relevant to the new academic environment.

Some participants highlighted the need for language training and the importance of learning the local language. Intensive language learning at the beginning of the hosting period (as for certain exchange programmes for students) would be a good solution.

In preparing for the next steps, there is a major challenge with regard to excellence and the competition within academia. This is a challenge for any early career scholar, but particularly for the researcher at risk, who is new in the region and might have involuntary career breaks. It is important to have an open discussion on expectations; what is possible and what the challenges will be. It is also important to add elements of job-coaching and career development into the hosting period as a way to prepare the scholar for the next step and considering career options also outside of academia.

Additionally, it was discussed that the mentors might also need support. It was suggested to create a platform for academic mentors to share their experiences with each other.

Concluding remarks

If looking at the results from the survey and the areas where additional support was needed most of those are also mentioned by the mentors in the discussion e.g. language training, networking, finding a permanent position and career options outside of academia. Scholars are though also pointing at additional points that

might be important to consider e.g. more information of the administrative tasks and understanding and respect for the past career of the scholar.

It is clear that the mentoring of scholars is seen as very rewarding task that is both a personal and professional engagement, but that more support functions within the hosting institution should be involved. It is also advised to integrate the scholar into more internal networks and research groups within the hosting university in order both to create a better social and academic network for the scholar, but also to involve more persons to support the scholar.