

## Mentoring and peer approaches for researchers at risk: A Brief Guide

### Background

Feedback from Inspireurope (2019-2022) highlights mentoring as a crucial element of integration of researchers at risk into the academic labour market. This brief guideline is developed as a resource for host institutions and employers wishing to improve integration of researchers at risk within their institutions and is targeted towards academic mentors, institutional contact points, and others involved in the hosting of researchers at risk at higher education institutions (HEIs).<sup>1</sup> It is based on recommendations and examples of good practice gathered through workshops and dialogue with relevant stakeholders such as mentors, institutional contact persons, and researchers at risk within the framework of the Inspireurope+ project.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it builds on the results of the webinar on *Mentoring and peer approaches to support researchers at risk* which is available on the [Inspireurope+ website](#).

### Definitions

#### Mentorship

A relationship between two people where the mentor provides advice and guidance to their mentee to help them grow, learn, and develop professionally.

#### Peer mentoring/support

A form of mentorship that usually takes place between a person who has lived through a specific experience (peer mentor) and a person who is new to that experience (the peer mentee).

Effective mentoring of researchers at risk comprises several stages and elements which are outlined below:

### 1. Preparing to mentor

**Objective:** To facilitate a positive mentoring experience, preparations should start as early as possible.

#### Designate several mentors with different roles and responsibilities

Successful integration to a host institution necessitates consideration of the researcher's personal and professional needs. Therefore, it is advisable to appoint different mentors with varied skillsets to promote holistic integration of the researcher in the work environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that this guideline is not intended to be a complete guide to mentoring, rather the purpose is to share useful approaches to mentoring researchers at risk within a host institution. Recommendations for further reading are available in Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> Inspireurope+ is funded by the European Commission's Marie-Sklodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), Horizon Europe. The project coordinates and strengthens support for researchers at risk across Europe.



Some of the different mentoring roles are outlined below:

#### Academic mentor

Ideally a senior researcher that can provide support related to research, integration into the academic community and career development.

#### Administrative mentor

Ideally a human resources representative or a staff member who holds a similar role at department level, knows the institution well, and can provide advice or support in issues related to pre-arrival and arrival processes and procedures, as well as providing access to the necessary department and university support structures during the stay.

#### Peer support

Peers can share insights about navigating day-to-day challenges both within and outside the university. The peers could be international and/or national researchers or PhD-students, depending on the seniority of the researcher at risk.

The mentoring roles are described and exemplified in more detail in the section on types of mentoring.

#### Make use of existing on-boarding processes

- Consider if and how the researcher can get acquainted with the institution before their arrival.
- Encourage the researcher to attend orientation week, induction courses, and other introductory meetings and events at the university, faculty, and department level.
- Make use of other available on-boarding resources in the university, such as welcome office or similar.

#### Apply a personalized approach to mentoring

- Engage early in dialogue with the researcher at risk to gain an understanding of her/his situation and the preparations she/he requires for a successful transition to a post-fellowship period.
- Identify the immediate needs and make sure to continue reviewing and adjusting priorities throughout the hosting period.
- Acknowledge that the needs of the researcher at risk vary depending on whether she/he is arriving as a single person or with a family. Make sure to clarify those needs as soon as possible to secure a good start.
- Recognize that the length of stay makes a great difference. Mentors should bear in mind that researchers hosted for a short stay will have less time to plan and prepare for the post-fellowship period and therefore may require a greater level of support.



## 2. Types of mentoring

There are different types of mentoring relationships. Therefore, it is important that the roles and responsibilities are clear to all involved to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, delays, and frustration. Mentors should clearly communicate the parameters of the support they are able to provide.

### Academic mentoring

**Objective:** To support the professional development of researchers at risk, aiding their integration and advancement within the academic community.

Elements of academic mentoring include:

- **Utilising institutional support and relevant expertise:** Being an academic mentor is a multi-faceted role which can often be challenging. Signpost relevant additional supports and services to the researcher and explore partnerships or collaborations with other institutional contacts who can provide helpful expertise, where appropriate e.g. a career development advisor or research support officer.
- **Expectation management:** Identify and manage the expectations of the researcher at risk. A mentoring agreement that outlines the frequency of meetings, goals for each phase of the mentorship, and the roles both parties will play can be helpful. Include specific targets, such as submitting a certain number of grant applications or presenting at international conferences.
- **Situation analysis:** Researchers at risk vary in terms of their autonomy, self-confidence, experience with international settings. Assessing the researcher's profile, experience and transferable skills and helping the researcher to find their place within the institution is an important task.
- **Job-shadowing:** Invite the researcher to join and participate in all relevant activities alongside the academic mentor as a way of familiarising themselves with the institution and making new contacts.
- **Career and skill development:** Develop a personalized career plan with the researcher, detailing pathways to achieve specific academic goals. Identify gaps and how to bridge them. For example, if the researcher aims to improve their publication record, academic mentors could help them to identify suitable journals, prepare manuscripts, and navigate peer review processes and help with translating existing publications to English. Liaise with the university's career development department to explore services which could be provided in addition to or in cooperation with a specific mentor.<sup>3</sup>
- **Offer relevant training opportunities:** In tandem with the point above, offer suitable trainings and professional development opportunities. Depending on the needs of the researcher, these could entail workshops on research methods, academic writing, grant writing, research presentation skills, pedagogy, amongst other topics.
- **Navigating the academic labour market:** In connection with career development and training, inform the researcher at risk about the national academic landscape, including requirements and procedures necessary to apply for academic posts at the national level.

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of career development support in RWTH AACHEN [for PhD students](#) and [for Professors](#)



- **Networking and integration:** Facilitate connections with key faculty members and research groups that share the researcher's interests. Organise introductions and regular check-ins with these groups. Encourage participation by the researcher in academic conferences, both as an attendee and speaker, to boost visibility in the field.
- **Teaching opportunities:** Assist the researcher at risk in maintaining an identity as a university teacher by arranging teaching and interactive opportunities with students.
- **Strategic internationalisation/expert role:** Invite the researcher at risk to share knowledge about their home country or region, where relevant and applicable. Such invitations boost institutional learning for staff and students, while offering an opportunity to the researcher to share their expertise and experience.
- **Staff exchange/networking on a European level:** Encourage the researcher at risk to broaden their network by making use of Erasmus staff training grants.

### Administrative mentoring

**Objective:** To streamline the researcher's integration into the host institution's administrative framework, ensuring they have access to necessary resources and support.

Elements of administrative mentoring include:

- **Pre-arrival support:** Examples include providing information and assistance in relation to immigration requirements, accommodation, banking, and pre-school/school arrangements in case of accompanying children, if applicable.
- **Arrival support:** For example, providing an office, facilitating access to other physical and digital spaces, helping the researcher (and their family) to overcome any obstacles which arise during the initial arrival period.
- **During the stay:** Facilitate introductions and access to relevant resources such as necessary research facilities and logistical support. For example, arrange for guidance on using the institution's library resources, including special access to restricted collections relevant to their work, and facilitate introductions to the IT support team to assist with technical needs. Check in with the researcher at risk on a regular basis to discuss needs and priorities. Prepare to help the researcher address problems as they arise. Assist the researcher to plan and prepare for the remainder of their stay and beyond.
- **Towards the end of the hosting period:** Assist the researcher at risk with their transition plan, for example referring the researcher for legal advice on residency status. Comply with institutional exit processes, where applicable.

### Peer support

**Objective:** To foster a supportive social network that enhances the personal well-being and cultural integration of researchers at risk.

Examples of peer support:

- **Create a "buddy" system:** Match the researcher at risk with a peer who has been at the institution for a longer time.



- **Engage the community:** Introduce the researcher to a community of peers, where possible. Finding a community which can turn into a 'group of friends' plays an important role in creating conditions for wellbeing and good hosting. Offer other resources in the host institution, such as welcome services, events for international staff, or similar.
- **Inclusion:** Make sure to include the researcher at risk in social gatherings, cultural outings, and institutional celebrations, facilitating their engagement with the broader community.
- **Create mutual learning opportunities:** Provide opportunities for researcher at risk to share aspects of their culture and research with the university community to foster mutual respect and understanding.
- **Consider introduction to communities outside of the institution:** Depending on the researcher's own preferences, connecting with relevant and supportive groups and organisations outside of the institution can help the researcher to integrate into the wider community.

### 3. Key considerations when mentoring researchers at risk

**Objective:** To provide tailored and comprehensive support to at-risk researchers which addresses their unique needs and circumstances.

- **Health and wellbeing:** Recognize the unique challenges faced by researchers at risk, including potential trauma and ongoing concerns for family members in their home countries. Offer appropriate mental health support and counselling.
- **Address security concerns, including digital security concerns:** Identify with the researcher any security concerns they may have. Explore issues around publicity and visibility within the institution. For example, does the researcher wish to have their profile published on the website or their name on the staff list? Authoritarian governments increasingly use surveillance, malware attacks, online harassment, and disinformation campaigns to threaten dissidents and critics living in other countries. Gain an overview of prevalent methods of digital transnational repression and apply strategies to guard against digital threats to the researcher. Seek expert advice and assistance, where appropriate.
- **Language barriers:** Be mindful of language barriers and assist the researcher in finding language supports. Due to limited time and/or capacity, researchers at risk may have to choose between improving their English or embarking on learning the local language of the host institution. Support the researcher in navigating this choice and identify priorities.
- **Academic traditions vary:** Be mindful of the differences in academic culture between the host institution and the researcher's home institution. In some academic cultures, there is a greater focus on teaching and less on research. The researcher may, for instance, have limited experience in applying for research funding or publishing peer-reviewed articles.

### 4. Considering careers beyond academia

**Objective:** To ensure the researcher at risk is aware of a wide range of professional opportunities, including those beyond academia.



- **Expectation management:** The European academic labour market is highly competitive and it is challenging for researchers to obtain a secure position in academia. Host institutions have a role to play in ensuring that researchers at risk are fully aware of the challenging work environment and employment frameworks for researchers across Europe so they can make fully informed decisions about whether to focus energies on remaining within academia or invest more effort in alternative opportunities.
- **Make alternative career paths visible:** Considering a career beyond academia depends on the researcher's background, seniority, and openness to career change. From the beginning of the hosting experience, open a dialogue on alternative career pathways which can include research outside of academia, for example in industry.
- **Explore existing institutional and other resources on alternative careers:** Career development services often provide information and training for PhD students on transitioning to non-academic careers. Signpost such resources to researchers at risk or refer researchers to specialist services for further support. Connect researchers with support within the institution (e.g. internship possibilities, partner companies, support for entrepreneurship, local EURAXESS node, coaching and career advice) and externally (e.g. local science parks, support for entrepreneurship at local or regional level, stakeholders/service providers with knowledge of job market for highly educated individuals).

### 5. Ensuring organisational learning

**Objective:** To capture lessons learned and continuously improve the mentoring process.

- **Make organisational learning a priority:** Regularly review and assess mentoring arrangements. Ideally, review would be carried out by a central institutional stakeholder with an overview of mentoring arrangements across the institution.
- **Feedback and adjustment:** Create structured opportunities for both mentors and mentees to provide feedback on the mentoring process. Use surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one interviews to gather insights and identify areas for improvement.
- **Documentation and review:** Maintain records of mentoring strategies and outcomes. Regularly review these to understand what is working and what can be improved.
- **Sharing best practices:** Organise fora where mentors can share experiences and strategies. Share hosting outcomes to provide insights that can inform other institutions and future iterations of the program.
- **Training for mentors:** Offer training sessions or meetings for mentors that cover effective communication, cultural competency, and advanced mentoring techniques. Ensure that these training sessions are informed by the latest research and feedback from current mentoring experiences.



## Annex 1: Further readings

### Examples of other mentoring programs

- [Remote fellowships for researchers at risk](#)
- [EURAXESS mentoring program](#)
- [Tent mentoring programs for refugees](#)

### Examples of mentoring guidelines

- [MSCA Guidelines on supervision](#)
- [CARA mentoring guidelines](#)
- [University of Oslo information for new academic mentors of researchers at risk](#)

