



EU-LIFE Pathfinder: Mentorship Programme for Postdoctoral Women 2024 Guidelines

Introduction and objectives of the mentoring programme

Following the success of the LIBRA Career Development Compass, the EU-LIFE Gender Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Working Group is relaunching the mentoring initiative to support women early career researchers (postdoctoral level) seeking to develop their careers. This guide was developed to outline the mentoring framework, and to support both mentors and mentees, who wish to take part in the programme and use mentoring to help women postdocs in life sciences achieve career success. Our ambition is to start this mentoring programme as a pilot, and evaluate its success after the first year, and ideally scale to more participants.

Within the framework of the EU-LIFE programme, there are a number of objectives that the mentoring programme aims to achieve:

- Identify experienced and open PIs and Science managers across 15 EU-LIFE institutes who are interested and available to become a mentor
- Provide interested women postdocs within the EU-LIFE member institutes with access to the entire pool of experienced mentors;
- Build an engaged and collaborative network of mentor-scientists across EU-LIFE institutes;
- Provide a platform for science managers/PIs from diverse scientific career paths to share their experiences, knowledge and advice with postdocs;
- Place a focus on the challenges women may encounter in their careers and possible approaches/solutions to those challenges;
- Seek to support the participants on their paths to independence and professional development.

The intended duration for the mentoring programme is 12 months. However, the relationship between mentor and mentee and their exchanges can endure beyond the programme framework. The EU-LIFE team will also carry out an evaluation after the 12 months.

What is mentoring

While there isn't a single universal definition of mentoring, the definitions, most often cited in literature (Kram (1985), Hansford et al. (2003) and Clutterbuck (2004)) highlight the three main functions of the mentoring relationship:

- The function to support the mentee with their professional growth, which also implies that mentees are empowered to take the next steps for their personal learning and career progression, as well as assuming personal accountability for their careers and growth
- The function of sponsorship, which entails providing resources, visibility and coaching mentees to the right career opportunities for them



- The function of psycho-social support, such as feedback, advice and encouragement.

Mentoring programmes have existed for many decades, and are often put in place in academia to foster the attraction and retention of women scientists, as well as to support their career advancement. Some senior scientists also view mentoring as a fundamental part of their role as a scientist, as a way of helping grow the next generation of successful women scientists and PIs.

Existing mentoring programmes can have different objectives and target women at different stages in their academic careers, with varying duration and intensity. A number of mentoring programmes also aim to redress the imbalance of women in academic leadership positions.

In the 2014 EU-LIFE Policy to mentoring PIs in life sciences, we use the following definition:

A mentoring relationship is one that may vary along a continuum from informal/short-term to formal/long term in which faculty with useful experience, knowledge, skills, and/or wisdom, offers advice, information, guidance, support, or opportunity to another faculty member or student for that individual's professional (and personal) development.

The best mentorships are characterized by mutual respect, trust, shared values, and good communication and the most successful relationships are ones where the mentee fully understands and shares their mentor's vision for success.

We are fully aware of the great increase in pressure and workload in academia and science fields over the past years, and that this may be one of the barriers for scientists to join a mentoring programme, both as a mentor, and as a mentee. Therefore, this EU-LIFE mentoring programme won't impose a cadence of meetings, we leave this up to the participants, for them to come to a mutual agreement as to the intensity and length of the mentoring relationship. However, it is important that then both parties respect this agreement and are aware of the commitment this will entail. As for the duration, we expect a commitment of twelve months that can be extended if agreed by both parties.

The benefits of participating in a mentoring programme in science

Whereas one may think that mentoring only has benefits for the mentee, with only the investment for the mentor, research shows that both mentee and mentor benefit from participating in a mentoring programme. As a side-effect of the mentoring relationship, there may even be the opportunity for scientific collaboration, but this is not the primary objective.

Benefits to the **mentee** include:

- Unbiased, independent feedback on their work and career progression
- A sparring partner for next career steps and someone to help the mentee to dream big
- Access to professional networks and breaking out of professional isolation
- Identifying development and growth opportunities
- Improved soft skills, such as writing, presenting, self-confidence, assertiveness, communication skills
- Guidance for next career steps and/or their research focus
- Meeting with a role-model and someone who has walked the same career path before



Benefits for the **mentor** include:

- Personal and professional recognition and satisfaction for advancing someone else in their career
- Improved mentoring skills, which include empathy, active listening, strategic career guidance
- Access to new networks and scientific ideas

Pairing the mentee with the mentor

We are aiming to find the best possible match for both mentees and mentors, with regards to field of research, career interest, availability and also a personal affinity. It is also important to enter the programme with an open mind and seeing whether needs, interests and availability match. This is why we highly encourage mentors and mentees to organise a first pre-meeting to have an open conversation about the expectations, interests and availability, and if either party feels that this pairing won't be the right one, get in touch with the programme organisers to find a new pairing.

As there are more mentees than mentors, we ask mentees to identify their first choice for mentor from the list provided on the EU-Life website, and also justify their first choice in a paragraph in the application form. While we will try to match every mentee with their first choice mentor, due to the numbers this won't be possible, so we also request mentees to indicate their 2nd and 3rd choice mentor, to ensure that the programme organisers pair them with mentors they prefer.

Frequency of mentoring meetings

The frequency of the meetings and the level of detail of mentoring discussions is up to the mentor and mentee to agree on. We strongly advise mentors and mentees, that have just been paired together to organise a pre-meeting virtually, to get to know each other, and to align on the vision for the mentoring and the career aspirations and success of the mentee, as well as each other's expectations. This is also the meeting to see whether the pairing is the right fit for both parties and whether there should be a new matching. This is not yet part of the mentoring.

For the mentoring relationship to be successful, we highly encourage mentors and mentees to meet at least twice during the relationship, for the mentee to fully benefit from the experience and insight of the mentor, to explore different career avenues, networks, strategize on visibility and contacts, as well as to outline the potential career steps of the mentee. One of these meetings should be ideally in person, with travel costs supported by their institute.

Any additional meeting during the mentoring relationship is very much welcome and is up to the parties involved.

The mentor role needn't take an excessive amount of time. Establishing firm and clear ground rules with mentees can improve efficiency. To begin, clarify together what the mentee expects from the relationship, match it against the expectations of the mentor, and reach consensus.

Mentors may also decide, in certain cases, to call upon the support of other senior experts, PIs or academics who can all contribute to a different aspect of the mentoring process, fill-in details and have access to different networks, resources or ideas.



Characteristics of effective mentoring

In formal mentoring relationships, the roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees should be defined and made explicit from the outset. Both the mentor and mentee have responsibilities for maintaining the productivity of the relationship.

The following are a few pointers to ensure the mentoring relationship goes as smoothly and is as impactful as possible:

- By developing a clear understanding of the career objectives of the mentee and what success would look like
- By agreeing unequivocally on the strategy to reach the objectives
- By agreeing on the specific milestones, timeline and deliverables (if there are any)
- By agreeing on the meeting frequency and cadence, setting an agenda in advance for the meetings
- By establishing an open and transparent communication and giving and accepting constructive feedback

Guide to mentors

As mentoring is a loosely defined, voluntary activity, it also highly depends on the personality, time and availability of the mentor, and what the mentoring relationship entails. Nevertheless, there are a number of minimum standards that will contribute to a smooth, impactful and also enjoyable mentoring experience, both for the mentor and the mentee.

In terms of the mentor, please be aware of the following demands of the role:

- Commitment to the time required for getting to know the mentee, the meetings and preparing for the high-quality input and sponsoring activities
- Commitment to reviewing the mentee's ideas and strategies
- Guidance on setting realistic, yet ambitious career goals
- Collaborative development of appropriate and effective strategies for achieving those career goals
- Opening academic and non-academic networks of influence
- Helping with the appropriate visibility and promotion of the work of the mentee
- Careful and active listening, ability to work across boundaries of gender/race/ethnicity/sexual orientation/ culture/religion
- Provision of constructive feedback
- Appropriate sponsorship activity
- Maintenance of confidentiality and creation of an environment of trust
- Respect for personal boundaries

Guide to mentees

The mentee is in the driving seat of the mentorship relationship. The main mistake to avoid as a mentee is to expect the mentor to be pro-active and drive the mentoring process forward. Therefore, the mentee needs to be firstly clear about their expectations, their most important questions and needs and also be realistic about what can be achieved in the mentoring relationship.

Here is a list of expectations towards the mentee to make the most out of the mentoring experience:



- The mentee should be curious, organized, efficient, responsible, and engaged.
- Actively engaging in the identification of specific developmental goals for which guidance is sought
- Commitment to setting meeting times and agendas to ensure a productive discussion
- Initiative and follow through in both setting and completing agreed-upon goals
- Preparation of agreed-upon deliverables in adequate time for review by mentors, with respect for the time constraints of mentors
- Development of listening skills and willingness to work outside of “comfort zones,” across boundaries of gender/ race/ethnicity/sexual orientation/culture/religion
- Ability to solicit and consider thoughtful, constructive feedback
- Respect for personal boundaries

Contact details and additional resources

The main point of contact for the mentoring programme for 2024 is the EU-LIFE office: contact@eu-life.eu.