

Towards gender equality in research and academia: conceptualising and practising inclusive mentorship through community building, co-creation and art-based methods

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Aleksandra Thomson

Business School, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

María López Belloso

Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain

Marta Warat

Institute of Sociology, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland, and

Areti Damala

CNRS, Pessac, France

Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores inclusive mentoring as a transformative tool for promoting gender equality in European academia and research. It reflects on the work of COST Action VOICES, which addresses systemic barriers and inequalities disproportionately affecting women and marginalised groups. The paper critically examines mentorship programmes, highlighting power imbalances, intersectionality and the role of participatory, co-creative and art-based approaches in reshaping mentoring practices.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on collaborative initiatives led by VOICES, the paper presents findings from an exploratory mentoring mapping exercise. Additionally, it reflects on the inclusive mentoring summer training held in Bilbao in 2024. Art-based methods and participatory co-creation workshops were employed to capture lived experiences of mentors and mentees, resulting in the development of ten guiding principles for inclusive mentoring.

Findings – The paper reveals significant inconsistencies in the availability, sustainability and evaluation of mentoring programmes across Europe. It identifies key challenges, including unequal access, lack of intersectional approaches and limited institutional support. Despite these barriers, inclusive mentoring models emphasising reciprocity and reverse mentoring show promise in enabling resilience, psychological safety and systemic change. The co-creation of guiding principles reflects a collective vision for mentoring as a tool for empowerment and solidarity.

Originality/value – This paper offers a novel contribution by integrating intersectional feminist approaches with art-based and participatory methods to redefine mentoring. It underscores the necessity of nurturing mentoring frameworks as dynamic ecosystems, requiring continuous care and collaboration to sustain progress in equality, diversity and inclusion.

Keywords Intersectionality, Institutional change, Mentoring, Gender equality, Co-creation, Critical, Mixed methodologies

Paper type Technical paper

Introduction

In recent decades, the European higher education (HE) and the linked research ecosystem have undergone profound transformations. Neoliberalism and marketisation of HE have amplified

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existing gender inequalities and introduced new challenges, particularly for early career researchers and academics (ERC), with women being disproportionately affected. These inequalities are compounded by intersecting social factors such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, sexual orientation and disability among further categories of social difference.

In response, EU COST Action (VOICES, CA20137 [1]) was established in 2021 to help address some of these challenges. Focusing on institutional change, VOICES aimed to highlight gender-based inequalities in career development, mobility, decision-making positions and gender-based violence experienced by ERCs. Methods that guided VOICES' activities included creating opportunities for sustainable dialogue, co-creation, collaboration and community building between ERCs and stakeholders across the wider research ecosystem within the EU and beyond.

This paper presents the work with practitioners and researchers on inclusive mentoring, led by Working Group 1 (WG1: employment, career development, and mobilities). This includes the mentoring mapping exercise (MME) in WG1 members' countries and institutions and the inclusive mentoring summer training (IMST) in Bilbao in 2024. These activities are described and critically reflected upon and recommendations and final reflections for nurturing institutional change for inclusive gender equality are offered.

Mentoring redefined: bridging gaps, building inclusivity and tackling power imbalances

Mentoring is often presented as a universally beneficial tool for academic development. Yet, as feminist and critical scholarship has shown, mentoring is a socially situated practice deeply embedded in institutional power dynamics. In this paper, we adopt a critical, feminist and intersectional lens to interrogate both the promises and limitations of mentoring in research and academia. Our perspective challenges the neutrality of traditional mentoring and foregrounds models that centre equity, care and transformation.

As noted by Meschitti and Lawton Smith (2017), mentorship beyond supervision and probationary processes is essential for women's academic success. Mentoring at its core, is a relationship between a less experienced individual (the mentee) and a more experienced or senior and often older individual (the mentor) (Kram, 1985). This broad definition leaves much for interpretation, indeed, mentoring lacks a universally agreed-upon definition (Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017). However, we agree with the reflexive literature which conceptualises traditional "men-toring" as a practice which does nothing to address gender equality, but perpetuates toxic, masculinist norms in academia (Hoskin and Whiley, 2023). Following Goerisch *et al.* (2019, p. 1742), we recognise that "[c]onventional mentoring structures within the university are often rooted in patriarchal systems of power, hierarchy, and exclusion that perpetuate neoliberal, capitalist understandings of individualism and exceptionalism." In line with this critique, several studies have questioned the effectiveness of mentoring, suggesting that perhaps unintentionally it can contribute to reinforcing existing power structures and maintaining the status quo (Round, 2021).

Formal and informal mentoring models, though effective in fostering career advancement, require redefinition to address intersectional challenges such as race, gender and institutional culture (Houston, 2019). The effectiveness of mentoring relationships hinges on trust, mutual respect and the mentee's comfort in navigating their identity. Cross-cultural and same-race mentoring have been found to provide distinct advantages for mentees from marginalised backgrounds, as observed by Graham (2019). However, a lack of intersectional perspectives limits the understanding of how mentoring can address disadvantages faced by individuals with intersecting identities (Kaplan *et al.*, 2009). Mentoring relationships also face structural challenges, including hierarchical barriers and insufficient time allocation for meaningful interaction (Leh, 2005).

Our understanding of mentoring is informed by both empirical evidence and lived experiences, which reveal that mentoring can be a source of empowerment when relational, reciprocal and contextually responsive and when grounded in willingness and openness to learn and understand perspectives of others by engaging in mutual, non-hierarchical relations. As a result, it challenges the traditional role of mentors, leading them to not only become more informed, reflective,

empathetic, but also confident, demanding and empowered (Round, 2021). However, it may be also a site of exclusion when uncritically implemented. We advocate for alternative mentorship: reverse mentoring underscoring the upward flow of knowledge from mentee to mentor (Johnson, 2021); reciprocal mentoring (Round, 2021; Haddock-Millar *et al.*, 2023), “femme-toring” (Hoskin and Whiley, 2023) and co-mentoring models that reject uni-directional knowledge flows and instead build collaborative, peer-based relationships grounded in mutual learning and solidarity. These alternative forms challenge power hierarchies, control and inviolable roles, aligning with feminist epistemologies that centre care, emotion and relational knowledge (McGuire and Reger, 2003).

Intersectionality and inclusivity are also needed for understanding mentorship. For instance, mentoring relationships that prioritise equality and reciprocal learning create environments where both mentors and mentees benefit (Alvarez *et al.*, 2005). At the individual level, this inclusive and intersectional approach encourages mentors to acknowledge the limits of their own experiences and be sensitive to difference, as guidance suited to one group may not apply to individuals facing different forms of discrimination. Simultaneously, this perspective highlights the complex positioning of mentees, recognising both the multiple axes of their marginalisation and their potential positions of privilege. This dual awareness fosters a more nuanced understanding of how individuals can experience oppression and exercise power concurrently. This approach underscores the need of mentoring to be reflexive, context-aware, moving beyond assumptions of shared marginalisation (Brown and Montoya, 2020).

Relationships forged with the awareness of intersectionality and inclusivity foster critical discussions on institutional biases and equip participants to challenge gendered organisational norms (De Vries, 2010). Leenders *et al.* (2020) examined the transformational potential of mentoring programmes as a tool for gender equality in academic settings through three key dimensions: critical discussion and reflection on gendered organisational norms, creation of new narratives around academic success and experimentation with revised work practices. A notable aspect of their findings is the emphasis on cross-mentoring relationships, which provide a “safe space” for an open dialogue about implicit biases and structural inequities. The authors also highlight how mentoring programmes can empower mentors to act as change agents, leveraging their roles to question and alter entrenched norms.

Importantly, we also draw on the concept of “judgementoring” (Hobson and Malderez, 2013), which critiques the use of mentoring as a surveillance mechanism in performative academic cultures. This framework is particularly relevant in institutions where mentoring is used to assess, regulate or “fix” perceived deficiencies in marginalised scholars, rather than addressing structural barriers such as promotion criteria, precarious contracts or exclusionary leadership cultures.

Despite the growing interest in inclusive mentoring, practical implementation often falls short. Many mentoring programmes operate “on a wing and a prayer” launched with enthusiasm but underfunded, lacking institutional backing and overly reliant on the emotional labour of women and minoritised staff (Brown and Montoya, 2020). These limitations call for greater attention to the sustainability, evaluation and structural embedding of mentoring programmes within institutional EDI frameworks.

VOICES and the aim of this work: mapping and reimagining mentoring for inclusion

Mentoring was selected as a thematic focus due to its potential as a support mechanism for ECR, but also due to the evident inconsistencies and inequalities in how it is conceptualised, resourced and experienced. Through internal dialogue, VOICES WG1 members discovered striking divergences: while some had access to formal mentoring schemes, others reported *ad hoc* or invisible practices. In some national contexts, mentoring was celebrated as a leadership “pipeline” (France, Germany and UK), while in many others it remained peripheral, misunderstood or entirely absent.

This recognition motivated a twofold inquiry: to critically examine how mentoring is currently operationalised in different institutional and national contexts and to explore how inclusive, intersectional and feminist mentoring practices might be co-created and embedded as part of broader efforts towards institutional change.

To this end, the project undertook two interlinked activities:

- (1) The MME aimed to identify and analyse existing mentoring programmes across Europe and beyond, with particular attention to whether and how these schemes addressed gender and other intersecting forms of disadvantage. Recognising the situated nature of inequality, the mapping was conducted by VOICES WG1 members using their local, linguistic and institutional knowledge, enabling the identification of mentoring programmes across both formal and informal structures. While not designed to be representative, the mapping aimed to capture a broad range of mentoring practices spanning academia, industry, NGOs and hybrid spaces and to reveal both promising models and critical gaps. The analysis focused on dimensions such as accessibility, intersectionality, institutional embedding and sustainability.
- (2) The IMST, held in Bilbao in 2024, built on the findings of the mapping exercise to foster a participatory space where diverse stakeholders including mentors, mentees, programme designers, and policy influencers could co-create new understandings and practical principles for inclusive mentoring. The IMST served as both a reflective and generative forum, foregrounding emotion, care and co-creation through art-based and dialogic methodologies. Participants collaboratively produced a set of ten guiding principles for inclusive mentoring, grounded in lived experience and collective wisdom.

Together, these two activities form the empirical and conceptual backbone of this paper. Our aim is not simply to document mentoring practices, but to critically interrogate their structures, assumptions and exclusions and to offer an alternative, co-created vision for mentoring that is grounded in feminist, reciprocal and intersectional values.

In the following section, we outline the methodological design of these two activities, elaborating on the mapping process, the structure of the IMST and the participatory methods that shaped our findings.

Methodology

This study employs a participatory, feminist and intersectional methodology to explore inclusive mentoring practices in academia through two interrelated activities (MME and IMST). These were designed to capture diverse experiences, identify structural gaps and inform the development of inclusive, co-created mentoring frameworks.

Mentorship mapping exercise (MME)

The mentorship mapping aimed to explore the availability, structure and inclusivity of mentoring programs for women and marginalised academics across European and adjacent contexts. This exercise was not intended to be exhaustive or statistically representative, but rather exploratory and illustrative to document situated insights from local institutional contexts, guided by the insider knowledge of VOICES Working Group 1 (WG1) members (Thomson *et al.*, 2025). Table 1 provides steps of the methodology employed and Table 2 the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The resulting data included 88 programs from 22 countries and seven international initiatives. This mapping helped identify not only structural disparities and policy blind spots but also promising practices in mentoring programme design and evaluation.

Inclusive mentoring summer training (IMST)

The IMST brought together 55 individuals (both trainers and trainees) from 22 countries representing diverse academic, professional and geographical backgrounds. The training was intentionally inclusive, incorporating multiple stakeholders involved in mentoring, such as mentors, mentees, change agents tasked with mentoring initiatives and mentoring experts

Table 1. Mentoring mapping exercise methodology

Step	Description
Objective	Identify and assess mentoring programs that support women and marginalized groups in research and academic contexts (“gender+”)
Participants	WG1 members (researchers and practitioners across 18 countries)
Data Sources	Institutional portals, national reports, peer recommendations, IMST contributions
Data Collection Period	March–December 2023 (with additions in July 2024 during the IMST)
Analysis	Qualitative typology and thematic synthesis of programme types and inclusivity lenses
Limitations	Context-specific, non-representative; reliant on insider familiarity and public access
Ethical	No individual-level data collected; analysis confined to public-facing institutional initiatives
Considerations	
Source(s): Self-elaborated	

Table 2. Mentoring mapping exercise selection criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Formal mentoring programmes accessible in the member’s country or other countries via a known language	Mentoring programmes aimed exclusively at undergraduate or master’s students
Programmes familiar to the WG1 member; search is illustrative, not exhaustive	Informal or unofficial initiatives, one-off events, awards, or ad hoc activities
Programmes with individual or systemic impact across the research ecosystem	Programmes targeting professional services or non-academic staff in research and academia
Target audience includes women scientists and academics across all career stages, including doctoral training to professorship	Generic mentoring schemes that do not align with the inclusion criteria
Covers a range of disciplines and fields	
Applies an intersectional lens (e.g. gender + race/ethnicity, disability, class) across all research sectors (public/private, NGOs)	
Includes intersectoral programmes (e.g. entrepreneurship, leadership) where relevant lessons for research and academia can be drawn	
Source(s): Self-elaborated	

taking the role of the event trainers and facilitators. Selection criteria extended beyond academic experience to include mentoring exposure, regional representation, intersectional identity factors and motivation to participate. Trainers were similarly selected for their institutional, geographical and methodological diversity, ensuring a broad spectrum of mentoring experiences were represented.

Candidates had to submit a letter of motivation outlining their interest in mentorship and reflect how the IMST would support their professional development, be it in the role of a mentee, mentor or a mentoring coordinator. The selection panel consisting of three members scored 93 applications from 1–5 according to the four criteria: (1) the candidate provided a clear and well-articulated rationale for their motivation to attend the summer training; (2) the candidate demonstrated a strong understanding of the content and/or skills offered by the summer training programme; (3) the candidate presented a well-reasoned explanation of how participation in the summer training would contribute to their academic or professional development and (4) the proposal was coherently written and evidenced effective written communication skills. The panel prioritised applicants from marginalised or precarious positions where it was appropriate, including those affected by geopolitical conflicts (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)).

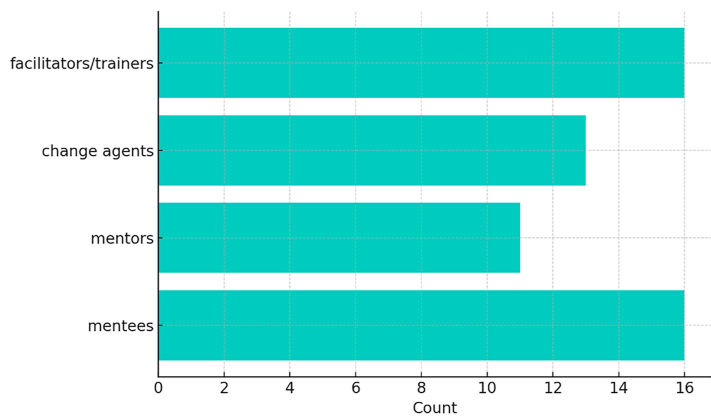


Figure 1. IMST Participants by profile. Source: Self-elaborated

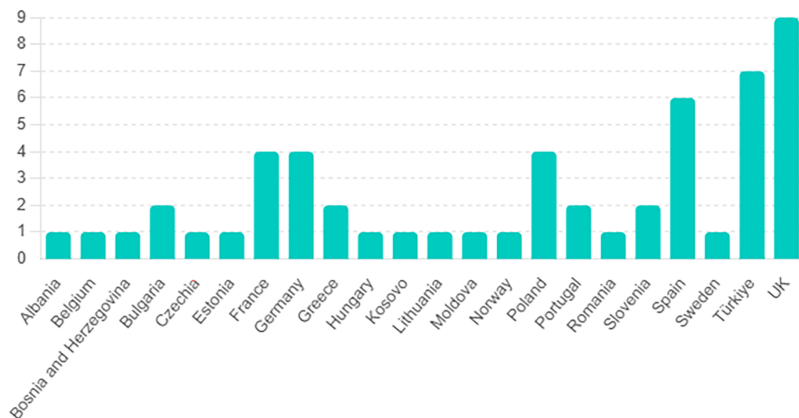


Figure 2. IMST Participants by country. Source: Self-elaborated

The selection of trainers and facilitators was intentionally inclusive, aiming to represent diverse perspectives and expertise, with particular attention given to engaging specialists from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Relatively few applications were received from men and consequently, the proportion of men in the event was notably small. Given the documented pattern that women typically engage more actively in gender equality initiatives compared to men (Kosakowska-Berezecka *et al.*, 2024), it is unsurprising that women constituted the majority of participants in our event.

The IMST employed a co-creation approach, emphasising mutual learning, shared ownership and the softening of hierarchical barriers between colleagues (Jamil and Howard-Matthews, 2025). This methodology, informed by feminist and reverse mentoring theories, provided a space where lived experience was recognised as valid and valuable knowledge. Adopting this approach was at times challenging, especially during the synthesis of the 10 mentoring principles, as the process to reach consensus took much longer than anticipated.

Parallel workshops used art-based and play-based methods to elicit emotional and reflective insights from participants. These creative activities, adapted from performative and collaborative research traditions (Haseman, 2006; McNiff, 2008) allowed participants to

express their mentoring experiences visually and metaphorically. These artefacts were later synthesised during plenary sessions into ten guiding principles for inclusive mentoring, co-developed through iterative group work.

Ethical considerations

Ethical reflexivity underpinned all stages of the research. While no individual-level sensitive data were collected during the MME or the IMST, care was taken to ensure safe participation, particularly for those from conflict zones. Participation in all activities was voluntary, with respect for privacy and emotional boundaries. The IMST design explicitly challenged extractive knowledge production by fostering solidarity and mutual empowerment.

Findings are based on exploratory, illustrative work and do not claim to present systematic or representative data. The interpretations and recommendations offered are grounded in lived experiences and informed by feminist and intersectional frameworks; they are presented as reflective propositions rather than generalisable conclusions.

Findings: mentoring mapping exercise (MME)

Mentoring programmes in Europe have gained significant traction in promoting academic and professional growth, with particular emphasis on advancing gender equality and leadership in academia and research. The following sections present three case studies that we found insightful and which informed our understanding of mentoring and served as a basis for exploring to what extent such programmes are available more widely. Such comprehensive programmes are relatively rare and we present them here as a source of inspiration and resources for institutions interested in developing their mentoring approaches.

Mentoring in Spain

Two notable programmes exemplify Spain's commitment to innovative mentoring. The Felise programme, part of the EU's gearing roles project, fosters feminist leadership by pairing early career women researchers with senior academics to tackle structural barriers and enhance professional networks. Similarly, the Rebeca program, coordinated by FECYT, facilitates intersectoral and intercultural mentoring to help researchers navigate career transitions into industry. Despite these achievements, a guide by the Unidad de Mujeres y Ciencia (UMyC, 2023) identifies a lack of standardisation in methodologies and limited integration of gender perspectives, highlighting areas for improvement in the Spanish mentoring landscape.

Pioneering European mentoring networks

Eument-net, the European Network of Mentoring Programmes, has played a pivotal role in advancing mentoring as a tool for promoting gender equality in academia and research across Europe. This work emerged from an international conference organised by Eument-net, emphasising its role in enabling dialogue and consolidating successful practices. Publications, such as "Mentoring for Change" (Eument-net, 2011), focus on the critical role of mentors in driving organisational and cultural change, while the edited guideline manual (Eument-net, 2008) provides foundational guidance for establishing mentoring programmes in diverse contexts, including regions without prior mentoring structures. These efforts have positioned the network as a cornerstone for mentoring innovation and equality-focused advocacy across Europe.

Mentoring leadership in the UK

In the UK, advance HE has made significant contributions to mentoring through its peer learning and mentoring scheme toolkit which serves as a comprehensive resource for enhancing or designing mentoring and peer-assisted learning schemes and provides guidance for institutions to refine or create programmes tailored to their specific needs.

Their Aurora Women's Leadership Programme, launched in 2013, has also supported over 10,000 women from nearly 200 institutions across the UK and Ireland. By combining workshops, action learning sets, and mentoring, Aurora addresses critical areas such as adaptive leadership, identity and influence. Participants benefit from self-directed learning and institutional mentorship, equipping them with the skills and networks needed for leadership roles. Aurora's success has significantly contributed to gender equality strategies in HE, enabling a new generation of women leaders.

Identified challenges for inclusive mentoring

While the outputs of this exercise listing the individual mentorship programmes are out of this paper's scope, we report three progressive "availability" challenges related to the implementation of inclusive mentoring across European research institutions. These findings reflect broad patterns of inequality, gaps in practice and emerging opportunities, based on the collective experiences of VOICES members and participants who during the IMST event also contributed to the mapping by identifying mentoring programmes in their institutions.

Challenge 1: availability of mentoring programmes – the equitable access challenge

Even though mentoring is recognised as an effective tool for personal and career development in research and academia, some members were unable to identify any official local mentoring schemes in their institutions. Some institutions had formal and recognised mentoring programmes, some had only informal opportunities and others could not identify any. On some occasions, the only provision offered was by large, EU-funded projects for a limited period of time. Such projects ended with the funding, without longer-term sustainability, making these opportunities exclusive and time-bound. A linked issue was that in some cases programmes existed but were not effectively communicated, making their reach questionable.

These obstacles show inconsistency across the EU member states and this contributes to our understanding of how mentoring differs dramatically in various settings. These insights highlight the ongoing need to promote and champion mentorship programmes as a tool for institutional change for gender balance, especially in leadership and decision making (EIGE, 2024). Research shows that effective mentoring is essential for all academics aiming to enhance research activity and thrive in their careers and that it should be centrally coordinated to ensure consistency (Davies and Healey, 2017).

Consistent and sustainable actions around setting up mentorship schemes should be carefully rolled out and managed to prevent reinforcement of disadvantage in countries and institutions with reduced resources and limited access to good gender equality practices and gender equality plans (GEPs). There is a risk that the gap in equality initiatives between the EU inclusiveness target countries [2] and those with high awareness and commitment to GEPs (France, Spain and Germany) will remain unless more is done to raise the profile of mentorship as an effective tool for gender equality.

Challenge 2: availability of published evaluation and impact – the evaluative capacity challenge

There was a lack of transparency in evaluation and reported impact. This is not surprising, as institutions will be naturally cautious and unwilling to overshare sensitive information, particularly any evaluations pointing to ineffectiveness. On the other hand, the challenge might be underpinned by evaluation not being seen as an integral stage of mentorship programmes. Evaluation is a complex and time-consuming task. In academic settings, where equality initiatives are not receiving adequate financial support and where official mentorship programme managers or equality officers do not exist, evaluation will remain an aspect which is colloquially termed "a nice to have". Before evaluation can take place, first monitoring is

essential, which ensures different data are collected at different time points, from different stakeholders (mentors, mentees, programme implementers and colleagues) in relation to both the process of the mentoring programme and its outcome (short- and long-term). This task requires much planning already in the design stage, frequent touch points during the implementation period and a comprehensive analysis of all monitoring data and activities thereafter.

Indeed, as reported by House *et al.* (2021, p. 1) in the context of academic medicine “mentoring is popular with many who receive it”, however, there is still a lack of comprehensive evidence of effectiveness in reducing gender inequality. If it is conducted, evaluation relies on self-reported accounts of satisfaction, well-being or short-term effects on career, caveats also existing in mentoring interventions also in the research and innovation ecosystem (Guyan and Douglas Oloyede, 2019; Moody and Aldercotte, 2019). Long-term, objective evaluation is still rare (Höppel, 2014) and would necessitate longitudinal data collection requiring sustained contacts with the mentees, some awareness of any mediating variables and ideally a control group who did not take part in the mentoring programme for comparison. All these aspects may be simply impractical or burdensome for most institutions that introduce practitioner-, rather than researcher-initiated mentorship programmes.

However, we wish to emphasise that these caveats should not discount evaluation based on self-reports of satisfaction and short-term impact. Self-reports are still a valuable source of information about the lived experience of mentoring from both mentors and mentees, and allow identification of any potential risks of harm (such as bullying, harassment, breach of trust, etc.), effective pairing of dyads and a more nuanced understanding of which function the mentoring programme has fulfilled in the short term, for instance, career functions or psychosocial functions (Kram, 1985). This method also invites a level of co-creation: what should be improved, introduced or stopped, thereby making the participants’ voices heard during the iterative design and implementation process (Peschel and Höppel, 2008).

Challenge 3: availability of programmes with a focus on intersectionality – the contextual adaptation challenge

The challenge of contextual adaptation is presented last to reflect the notably striking scarcity of mentoring schemes that recognised multiple axes of social difference (intersectionality or inclusive gender), with few exceptions. It was extremely rare to identify any mentorship programmes that in some way acknowledged the role of context and particular social and historical configurations and their impact on the complexity of social inequalities (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Most programmes focused on “women” as a single category of difference at various career stages. The mapping did not identify many tailored provisions of mentorship to diverse groups which may have been more marginalised, disadvantaged or discriminated against in a given institutional, national or cultural context. This finding to some extent might be explained by the relatively recent inclusion of an intersectional lens as a required consideration in the design and implementation of GEPs at the European research policy level, namely in Horizon Europe funding (2021–27). As such intersectionality had not yet gained much traction. Anecdotally, some mentoring programme stakeholders recognised these caveats and still perceive intersectionality as a “luxury” in some institutional and national settings. The perception is that intersectionality can only be robustly engaged with once work focused on gender inequality makes more progress towards institutional change. However, our position is that it is never too early for considering intersectionality in mentoring programme design and implementation.

There are some examples of early champions: the UK academic and research landscape is an exception to this paucity offering mentoring programmes which intentionally focus on intersecting categories of social difference (gender and race). Examples of these programmes include the national-level “100 Black Women Professors . . . NOW” (launched by WHEN:

Women's Higher Education Network) and the multi-institutional Elevate programme aimed at women from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds, inclusive of cisgender women, trans women and non-binary people (four universities in the UK: Bristol, Bath, Cardiff and Exeter). Examples of excellent practice have also been recently emerging from Austria, a multi-institutional programme which incorporates much broadly understood intersectionality in pairing dyads at the start of the programme at the University for Continuing Education Krems jointly with the Johannes Kepler University Linz and Paris Lodron University Salzburg (member of Eument-net, [Gindl, 2024](#)).

Implementing a robust intersectional perspective across mentorship programmes is challenging and it also affects other GEP measures. This is primarily the result of national legal constraints that limit the collection of specific data, including information on ethnicity, race and sexual orientation ([European Commission, 2021](#)). Therefore, to implement intersectional perspective approaches mentoring programme managers might have to creatively overcome these constraints to ensure that they operate within national legislative framework and store sensitive personal data in accordance with the local and European law.

Findings: inclusive mentoring summer training (IMST)

The IMST provided further depth to these findings by surfacing experiential and emotional dimensions of mentoring often absent from formal evaluations. Through creative and participatory methods including art-based exercises participants explored the tensions, aspirations and lived dynamics of mentoring relationships. Visual metaphors such as storms, boats and butterflies illustrated how mentors are perceived as guides, allies or nurturers, but also revealed underlying power imbalances and emotional strain. The IMST affirmed that mentoring is not merely a professional development tool, but a relational and ethical practice embedded in broader systems of care, identity and belonging.

Co-creation and art-based outputs

In addition to the collaborative and co-creative plenary and group sessions, participants were invited to reflect and share lived experiences and expertise through several focused, art-based sessions featuring hands-on work. Arts-based methods ([White et al., 2025](#); [Haseman, 2006](#); [McNiff, 2008](#)) and play methods ([James, 2019](#)) have been effectively employed in academic environments as tools for reflecting on student learning, academic practice and research in HE. Within the IMST, we sought to experiment with such alternative methods to foster a comfortable, supportive and non-confrontational environment, encouraging participants to communicate their lived experiences and expectations regarding inclusive and supportive mentoring.

Our goal was to draw upon existing personal knowledge and resources to inform guidelines and good practices for mentoring. To achieve this, we proposed workshops incorporating art-related activities for both mentees and mentors. The first part of the workshops centred on art-based exercises, conducted separately in groups for mentees and for mentors.

Mentees were invited to reflect on their relationships with their mentors, considering and incorporating into their artwork all possible dimensions of social difference (see [Exhibit 1](#)) that could impact the design and implementation of intersectional mentorship. They were further encouraged to explore factors contributing to the success of mentoring relationships and programmes, as well as the challenges and tensions encountered throughout the mentoring process.

Mentors were asked to reflect in small groups on mentoring programs and lived experiences available within their institutions or countries. They were then encouraged to work in pairs, sharing their experiences with a particular emphasis on gender-focused mentoring from an intersectional perspective.

[Exhibit 1](#) illustrates various metaphors associated with the mentoring process by mentors. One participant likened the PhD journey to a perilous voyage through a tempest, with the

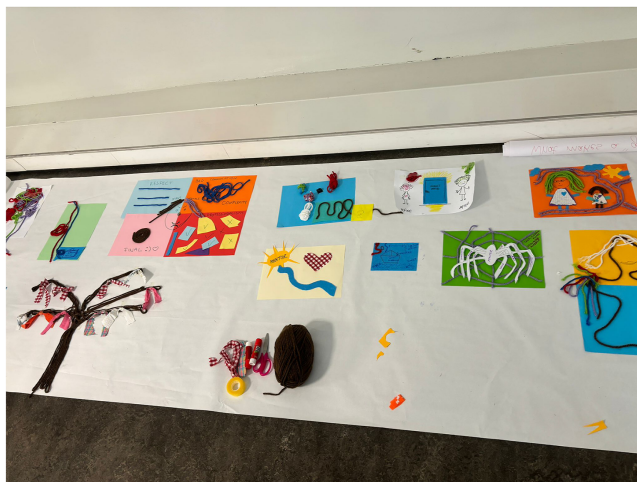


Exhibit 1. Artwork produced on mentor-mentee relationships using a variety of materials, such as sticky notes, coloured paper, pencils, glue, scissors, fabric, tissues and wool. Captured by authors

mentor as *deus ex machina* guiding the way. Common themes of growth and support appeared as strong trees bearing fruit or a path leading toward light, symbolising the mentor's guidance. In two cases, the mentor–mentee relationship was compared to a nurturing spider mother, while another depicted the mentor managing multiple responsibilities while guiding the mentee. One participant contrasted the mentee's state before and after a mentoring session.

Similarly, mentees used various images to underline the positive aspects of mentor–mentee relationships. One participant reflected on the value of an intersectional approach that encompasses many facets of her identity, particularly gender and minority status and illustrated this with a butterfly. As she admitted, the relation between mentor and mentee is “a beautiful relation that enables you to fly and reach your potential” (quote from a participant of IMST). Some participants, expecting a mentoring programme to foster a synergy between a mentor and a mentee, used metaphorical imaginaries (winding road, bunch of threads) or an angel figure to express feelings of confusion, rage or inner anger contrasted with the outer calm.

Another piece of art that depicted a mentor–mentee relationship as a boat, with the mentee playing the lead role and the mentor providing gentle backstage support, made these expectations very evident. The mentees' lived experiences demonstrate that, from their point of view, mentoring programmes are about more than just their professional growth; it is evident that they also view the importance of emotions, care and social justice. Importantly, these interactions between a mentor and a mentee called into question power dynamics and required openness, empathy, compassion, sensitivity, understanding and constructive criticism on both sides.

After creating their artwork, participants first presented it within their groups, which summarised key insights and takeaways using sticky notes. In a plenary session, each group shared their artwork and findings with all participants. The sticky notes from all sessions were then organised and discussed collectively. The principles suggested by both groups were presented in a plenary session, where recurring themes were refined into the final 10 inclusive mentoring principles. Some concepts were clearly identified as essential for mentoring programmes, but others prompted more in-depth debates, which resulted in their redefinition or their integration under the broader idea. All the groups' contributions were further compared and explored, demonstrating on the one hand the participants' involvement and

willingness to share their expertise in mentoring and ultimately recommendations for how an inclusive mentoring programme should be created.

Exhibit 2 illustrates the work finalising the 10 principles of inclusive mentoring. The process of distilling the numerous principles into ten was challenging, but collaborative group work highlighted shared concepts and priorities. This participatory approach ensured that all voices were heard, capturing the most essential principles of mentoring from diverse perspectives.

Output: the 10 guiding principles on inclusive mentoring

Finally, graphic recorder and illustrator Jorge Martín, assisted the participants in the final process of art production (**Exhibit 3**). Discussions held during the last day of the IMST further assisted in visually capturing the 10 guiding principles.

The ten guiding principles for inclusive mentoring, co-created at the IMST, synthesised these reflections and provided a framework for rethinking mentoring as a shared, values-based practice. These principles, ranging from mutual respect and structural support to intersectional awareness and emotional openness, offer a blueprint for building mentoring ecosystems grounded in equity and solidarity.

The principles were printed individually on ten t-shirts of varying sizes and showcased as part of a travelling exhibition across VOICES events, designed to provoke discussion about inclusive

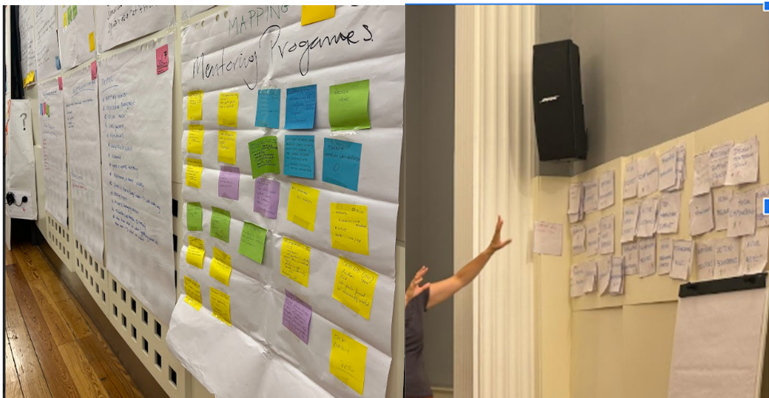


Exhibit 2. From artwork and reflections to 10 guiding principles. Captured by authors



Exhibit 3. Inclusive mentoring: the 10 guiding principles. Created by Jorge Martín

mentoring in research and academia. Each t-shirt featured one of the ten guiding principles, with the range of sizes symbolising a deliberate move away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach. This creative installation challenged the notion of a singular ideal researcher and instead celebrated the diverse backgrounds, identities and pathways individuals bring to research, encouraging reflection on how mentoring can better recognise and support such diversity.

Participant event feedback

The event received overwhelmingly positive feedback: “I feel I’m not alone in terms of tough road of academic career as a woman. I was a relief for me since I always thought that the problem was me. Thank you for everything”; “I liked the creative notion that influenced the whole week”; “I liked the art project! It encouraged me to think of mentoring in a different way and was a nice way to get perspectives [from other people than those] comfortable speaking in large groups”, “I liked everything: the plenary talks, the workshops, the informal discussions, the choices of attendees, the people I’ve got to meet or to know better, the contacts I’ve managed to establish”. However, we also received feedback from a neurodivergent participant who found the intensity of the event overwhelming and had to leave the room; this highlights the importance of providing alternative, quieter spaces and clearer communication of session intensity to accommodate diverse needs effectively ([Śliwa et al., 2021](#)).

Discussion

The uneven availability of mentoring programmes across Europe reveals entrenched disparities in institutional capacity and commitment to gender equality. In some contexts, mentoring exists only as part of short-term, externally funded projects, with little institutional investment in sustainability or systemic change. These conditions risk reproducing what [Hobson and Malderez \(2013\)](#) describe as “judgementoring”, mentoring practices that are regulatory rather than developmental, reinforcing hierarchical norms under the guise of support. To avoid this, we argue that mentoring must be understood as a strategic and structural tool for institutional transformation, not simply an add-on to existing academic support mechanisms.

The lack of rigorous, transparent evaluation mechanisms emerged as a second major concern. While participants recognised the value of self-reported satisfaction, most mentoring programmes lacked systematic monitoring or outcome measurement, often due to limited resources and institutional neglect. This absence of data not only impedes learning and improvement but also undermines the credibility of mentoring as a serious intervention for gender equality ([Hobson and Malderez, 2013](#)).

Intersectionality was identified as a largely missing dimension in current mentoring practices. Most schemes continue to treat women as a monolithic category, ignoring how race, migration status, disability, sexuality and class mediate access to and experiences of mentoring. This gap is particularly concerning given the EU’s increasing emphasis on intersectional GEPs and the urgent need to address structural inequalities in research institutions ([Kaplan et al., 2009](#)).

Despite these systemic challenges, the IMST offered a compelling vision of what inclusive mentoring can look like. Through participatory, co-creative and art-based methods, participants articulated mentoring as a space of mutual empowerment, emotional connection and collective learning. The ten guiding principles developed at the IMST reflect a transformative model of mentoring one that shifts the focus from hierarchy and performance to care, reciprocity and positionality ([Brown and Montoya, 2020](#)).

Implications

Our first recommendation is that mentoring be embedded within GEPs as a sustained and institutionally supported practice. This requires dedicated staff, long-term funding and clear strategic alignment with broader EDI goals. European research institutions, particularly those in the Inclusiveness Target Countries, should be supported through EU funding mechanisms

and peer learning platforms to develop, implement and sustain mentoring programmes. At the same time, we understand that mentoring initiatives are typically under-resourced and in times of increased financial pressures or crises might be sidelined (Augustus, 2021). Therefore, “organic mentoring” could provide a flexible alternative where formal mentoring structures cannot be implemented effectively, often due to limited resources or organisational constraints. This informal approach involves natural exchanges of advice, guidance and mutual support, without requiring structured matching or administrative oversight, but which is grounded in relational, collaborative learning and respect and care (Rogers-Shaw *et al.*, 2021).

Second, we recommend that evaluation and monitoring be embedded from the outset of mentoring programme design. Evaluation frameworks should include multiple forms of evidence quantitative, qualitative and experiential and account for both short- and long-term impact. Importantly, they should be co-designed with participants to ensure relevance, transparency and ethical sensitivity. Publication of evaluation findings, even in summary form, would enhance accountability and enable cross-institutional learning.

Our third recommendation is that mentoring programme managers conduct intersectional context analyses before programme design. This involves mapping local configurations of inequality, understanding historical and legal constraints (e.g. on data collection) and designing inclusive, flexible frameworks that allow diverse participation. Intersectionality should not be framed as a luxury or future goal, but a foundational principle guiding all stages of programme development. Table 3 presents possible dimensions of social difference recommended for exploring when designing and implementing mentorship programmes.

Our fourth recommendation is that inclusive mentoring is framed as a relational, reciprocal and ethical practice, not merely a professional development tool. It is grounded in distinct ethical principles and values, compared to existing mentoring alternatives such as diverse mentoring, group mentoring, peer mentoring and collaborative mentoring (c.f. Mullen and Klimaitis, 2019). While these models are less hierarchical and engage with issues of positionality, diversity and power relations to varying degrees, they tend to address these aspects in a more fragmented manner. In contrast, our framework adopts a more holistic perspective, aiming to integrate these dimensions comprehensively within a single model. Institutions should adopt co-creative models that include mentors, mentees, and other stakeholders in programme design, delivery, and evaluation. These approaches not only foster greater ownership and relevance but also challenge traditional academic hierarchies by recognising multiple forms of knowledge. This includes emotional and experiential expertise and mutual reciprocal learning with equality of roles “underpinned by the premise that both [participants] will learn perspective from each other” (Round, 2021, p. 267)

While emotional openness, empowerment and mutual support are integral to effective mentoring, it is equally important to establish clear boundaries, roles and expectations. This balance reflects a broader discussion in mentoring literature on a distinction between

Table 3. Possible dimensions of social difference for consideration in intersectional mentorship programme design and implementation

Social difference dimensions		
Disability (vs. ableism)	Neurodiversity (vs. Neurotypical)	Race and ethnicity
Sex and gender	Sexual orientation (vs. heteronormativity)	Educational and institutional affiliation
Professional and discipline affiliation	Socio-economic status and social capital	Culture, language, religion and country of origin
Occupational classification	Parental/paternal carer status	Education
Age (vs. chrononormativity)	Marriage and partnership	Pregnancy and maternity
Source(s): Adapted from Thomson and Gooberman-Hill (2024)		

friendships and befriending (Mullen and Klimaitis, 2019), pointing out that setting boundaries helps to maintain mentoring as personal and relational process.

We also stress the need to revalue mentoring as intellectual and emotional labour. Mentors, particularly those from minoritised groups, often provide informal support that is unrecognised, undercompensated and emotionally taxing. Institutions must acknowledge this labour by including mentoring in performance evaluations, allocating time within workload models and offering targeted training and support. Similarly, mentees should be viewed not as passive recipients, but as co-producers of knowledge who contribute to the transformation of academic culture.

Finally, we recommend that mentoring programmes be integrated into institutional efforts to build inclusive research cultures, alongside initiatives around inclusive leadership, equity-based hiring and anti-discrimination policies. Mentoring should not be isolated from these broader frameworks but woven into them, reinforcing a holistic commitment to equity and inclusion.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the diversity, accessibility and inclusivity of mentoring practices across European academic institutions and to explore how mentoring can be transformed through feminist, reciprocal and intersectional approaches. Drawing on the exploratory MME conducted by VOICES Working Group 1 members and the participatory co-creation of the IMST, we offered a critical perspective on the current state of mentoring in research and academia. The findings illuminated significant gaps in mentoring provision, evaluation practices and intersectional sensitivity while also pointing to promising alternatives grounded in care, solidarity and shared expertise.

About the author

Aleksandra Thomson is also affiliated with School of Education, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK.

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Notes

1. A COST Action is an interdisciplinary research network that brings researchers and innovators together to investigate a topic of their choice for four years. COST Actions are typically made up of researchers from academia, SMEs, public institutions and other relevant organisations or interested parties.
2. Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Republic of North Macedonia, Republic of Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine.

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Corresponding author

Aleksandra Thomson can be contacted at: ola.thomson@bristol.ac.uk