



## Re-UNITA project

### D3.2 Alliance Mentoring Programme for early-stage researchers (M12)

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## Abstract

Re-UNITA project, following the indicative list of institutional transformation modules in the field of research and innovation proposed in the work programme, offers a transformation agenda on the basis of the EU guidance. Thus, within the framework of WP3 the development of talent management actions and the implementation of common gender balance strategies have been proposed.

The partners have assessed the gender equality level in Re-UNITA universities, by sharing research tools and indicators already available and tested in research performing environments. In particular, partners intended to adapt the resources developed in the framework of the H2020 SWAFS project “MINDtheGEPs”, started in 2020 and coordinated by Cirsde-UNITO, to define quantitative and qualitative instruments to collect gender sensitive data at macro, meso and micro levels and to define proper indicators useful to measure potential gender imbalances in all key areas (decision-making bodies; recruitment and career progression; work life balance; research and teaching).

By endorsing the approach of “fixing the system not the women”, partners have promoted support action schemes not only for women researchers but also for men, both juniors and seniors (who are involved in selection committees and governing bodies). In particular, a common mentoring programme has been implemented in each university of the Alliance, to support researchers especially during the early stages of their academic career, through the exchange with senior fellows that can give advice for successful career management and suggest strategies to overcome potential cultural and structural barriers. Once the mentoring programme was defined, all the mentors appointed in the respective universities have been invited to attend a European meeting in Turin, organised by UNITO, where they have defined a common approach to support their mentees. After this first face-to-face event, regular online meetings have been organised (and are still being organised) for mentors, to encourage the sharing of their experiences with the mentees and to collect feedback from the ongoing mentoring process.

## Summary

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## 1. Participants

There are 51 mentees and 26 mentors, for a total of 77 participants. The mentors are all female researchers, while in the mentee group there are both women and men. Important to notice: UNIV-SMB has not started the programme yet (it will start in September 2023), therefore there will be a few more participants, in order to reach the targeted indicator of 90 participants.

University partner	Mentors	Mentees	TOTAL participants/partner
UNITO	9	18	27
UBI	4	9	13
USMB	The program will start next September 2023		
PAU-UPPA	3	5	8
UVT	5	10	15
UNIZAR	5	9	14
TOTAL			77

## 2. Mentoring programme

On the basis of the experience of the MindTheGeps project and considering that our scope is centered in formal academic mentoring programs, mentoring in academia can be envisaged as a relational structure which provides support and specific knowledge to develop a successful, independent academic career. On the basis also of the literature, effective faculty mentoring should involve both formal and informal relationships, including multiple “relationship constellations” distributed among different professional colleagues. It has been noted that academic mentors might cover three roles: teacher (that is, providing skills and knowledge closely related to their scientific work), sponsor (a facilitator of the mentee integration, who enhances their mentee visibility) and collaborator (the mentor can actively participate in the mentee research projects). Recent research has found that mentee who perceive their mentors as sponsors are most successful (in terms of less time to reach tenure), especially if the mentors are also perceived as teachers. Furthermore, some authors described three support functions for the mentoring of doctoral students: psychosocial (referring to counseling, offering support role modeling), instrumental (giving challenging assignments, exposure) and networking. The literature has also pointed out that mentoring is indeed a powerful intervention for the development of junior academics, who can look forward to higher

levels of well-being and better career outlooks, such as higher job satisfaction, self-efficacy, research productivity, less time to reach tenure.

The team shared all the ideas within the task 3.4 group and decided to design the characteristics of an effective mentoring to be implemented within the Re-Unita project. Again with reference to the literature, amongst the best practices in faculty mentoring (including program outline, and short- and long-term impacts), the key steps were chosen, as reported in the following list:

- Consulting junior and senior faculty, in order to identify the needs of all participants, assess the demographic groups and ensure they all have proper access to the mentoring programme;
- Identifying the structures, i.e., deciding which mentoring forms are most suited (for instance, skill acquisition usually lends itself more to workshops and seminars, while scholarly advice and support are more suited to one-to-one relationships and should be department-specific);
- Resources and tools available to provide mentors with training and incentives.

We then paid particular attention to (i) the mentor/mentee pairing, which is usually more successful when both the mentor and the mentees have some degree of choice; (ii) the definition of responsibilities and goals of the participants, which is paramount, and should be reviewed during the programme. (iii) The frequency of mentoring meetings should be agreed upon and reviewed as necessary, and should be tailored to the mentees' need and career stage (we suggested to have more frequent meetings in earlier stages), while retaining the junior faculty member independence and discretion in negotiating the frequency (in particular, meetings should be recorded and kept for reference for evaluating the progress of the activities). (iv) Last but not least, faculty and interdisciplinary group mentoring were considered, for they cover specific needs of the junior scientists, as they both facilitate peer-to-peer networking (the former is more focused on field-specific challenges and demands, while the latter could be more useful in discussing structural problems in academia. Both offer significant advantages and significant complexity, and thus should be designed with extra care, especially in the definition of roles, team structures, and communication between different disciplinary fields.

## 3. Activities

### 3.1 Train the trainers

The workshop, organised in Turin last beginning of October 2022 (both in presence and online) has targeted tutors selected by each university, who have learned from experienced trainers the theoretical framework of gender issues in academic communities and practiced strategies to guide their mentees on how to manage potential cultural and structural barriers.

This event has been launched during the 2022 edition of the European Researchers' Night (30th September 2022) and for the first time the partners of UNITA Alliance have joint the force, by designing common formats and implementing joint public engagement activities in the framework of the project U\*Night. During the Night the partners have organised a presentation of the mentoring programme in one of the common online format ("A talk with young research!"). This action has brought high visibility to the initiative, as an UNITA good practice in the context of gender policies.

During the Train the trainers event, after a general introduction of the Re-UNITA project and of the mentoring programme, a brief presentation of the results of the analysis conducted by the partners regarding their gender equality policies has been reported. After this, the training on gender and science has followed: it has been conducted by experts in the field coming both from the University of Turin and from abroad with specific focuses onto situated knowledges for (i) implementing gender equality plans and (ii) transformative mentoring. Both focuses have been conducted with an informal approach and with team activities, in particular for the transformative mentoring, in which both mentors and mentees started to build up their ideas of mentoring.



*Train the trainers meeting in Torino - Oct. 2022*

### 3.2 Mentors & mentees activity

This activity involves a one-year mentoring relationship, during which each mentor will follow two mentees: two monthly meetings for each mentee, in-person or online at the participant's discretion (one individual meeting between mentor and individual mentees and one where each mentor will meet with both mentees, which also allows moments of peer-mentoring).

Matching has to be done following a transdisciplinary criterion, by pairing mentors and mentees who are not from the same research field, but rather belong to related scientific areas. This reduces possible conflicts of interest and encourage the creation of a separate and confidential space where it will be possible to discuss individual and institutional issues outside regular work relationships.

Orientation and training session for mentors and mentees in November 2022 has taken place: basics of mentoring have been further discussed by all mentors and mentees in separate groups. Participant's expectations and reflections have been collected, and contact between mentors and mentee formally initiated after the meeting.



Two monitoring and evaluation moments have been decided: they will be conducted during the program through focus groups that will have taken place in February 2023 (and during a second meeting tentatively scheduled in September 2023).

#### **4 General remarks**

As far as the Unito team group dealing with gender issues and, in general, with gender equality programs, is also involved in the MindtheGEPs project, we took into consideration all its expertise in the field, namely for the use of the correct approach in designing the mentoring programme, the deepening of the literature published so far in this subject and especially for what concerns the “training” activities to build up correctly the mentor/mentees pairing.

This is the only benefit that we took in embedding from the very start of the writing of task 3.4 in the framework of the Re-UNITA project a group of colleagues with the proper know-how to go in the correct direction from the very beginning. We thus invested part of the “personnel” resources of the WP3 in hiring a post-doc student to run all the activities and that, under the supervision of prof. Cristina Solera and colleagues, could follow all the Re-UNITA partners in the various steps of the mentoring programme in order to achieve the best results by the end of the project.