

EULAR Research Interview Series

Why mentoring matters: EULAR explores mentoring needs among RMD researchers

Rheumatologist and researcher Dr Elena Nikiphorou from King's College London and resident Dr Philipp Bosch from Medical University of Graz talk about why mentoring is important and opportunities for EULAR to close mentoring gaps.

EULAR: How do you define mentoring, in particular research mentoring?

Elena Nikiphorou: There are many standard definitions and principles of mentoring out there. I understand research mentoring as the process whereby mentees are supported in their professional development journey and given tips, encouragement, and support on developing and maximising their skills, knowledge, and potential overall. Ultimately, it is to help mentees achieve their research goals and get where they want to go in their professional career.

Philipp Bosch: To be a bit cheesy, I would say mentoring is giving someone the opportunity to spread their wings and aim for higher goals.

EULAR: Have you personally experienced 'good' mentoring that helped you advance your research career?

Philipp Bosch: I am currently working on a PhD project, and I am fortunate to have a supervisor, Dr Christian Dejaco, who is also a fantastic mentor. I got in touch with him after I followed one of his classes during my medical school. At that time, I didn't know much about rheumatology. It was like a black box to me, but his presentation was so interesting and inspiring that I wrote to him afterwards. It was through him that I got into research.

His support and mentoring are of great importance to me. We discuss career goals and where I see myself in the next years. He also gave me the opportunity to work on EULAR projects, expanding my network and interests, and I got to develop practical and technical skills working with ultrasound, for example.

Elena Nikiphorou: I admit that I experienced what I would call 'proper' mentorship during the later years of my career when I got involved in the "[Emerging EULAR Network](#)" (EMEUNET). At that time, I realized I needed someone more than just a supervisor. I took the initiative to reach out to senior colleagues and get their advice. I was looking for something long-term and structured, a mentor-mentee relationship that would help me grow and be more focused. I was lucky to find people like this, who gave me solid advice and guidance, who helped me to develop a niche area of interest and become more focused.

EULAR: Where do you see critical gaps in the mentoring support for RMD researchers?

Elena Nikiphorou: I see a critical gap in mentorship support in the early career stages, especially for those not on an academic path but still aspiring for an academic career. Mentoring should already be made available during medical school to engage young talent and foster interest, mainly because specialties like rheumatology are not particularly encouraged.

During my early career, I didn't have the mentorship that I needed. Not all of my academic decisions to develop a research career were beneficial. For example, when I enrolled in an MD(Res) programme, I didn't know the difference between an MD(Res) and a PhD. And I didn't know the right people to ask. Only later, I realized that registering my research as a PhD would have been a better fit for me and my career goals. The funny thing is that it wouldn't have cost me anything additional, since in terms of the time dedicated to my research and the output, this was PhD standard as I was informed by the examiners, but it was just not applied for as a PhD when I initially registered for it. So, lacking the right advice at the beginning made me go a much longer, less structured path.

Another issue I see is that people who consider themselves mentors do not necessarily have training as a mentor. They might be excellent supervisors and excellent people, but they may not be aware of the true meaning of mentorship, which goes beyond supervision.

EULAR: What would you say are the most important skills a mentee needs to establish and maintain a successful mentoring relationship with a mentor?

Philipp Bosch: The most important thing is that you are interested and motivated to be mentored. I think it requires basic social skills, like being friendly, attentive, and on time. You need to be able to express your needs and have a vision of your aims.

Elena Nikiphorou: I fully agree with Philipp's list. A mentee must take the initiative, be enthusiastic, show respect and a positive attitude, and listen well. The mentee should be the one initiating meetings, doing the time management and organisation. Mentors can be very busy, so mentees need to be flexible.

EULAR: What do you consider the most important skills of an effective mentor?

Elena Nikiphorou: Good mentors engage with their mentee. They listen well but also challenge them. They provide honest feedback and guidance to help the mentee make the right career and research decisions. Mentors need to have a certain level of experience and knowledge to stimulate their mentees' thinking.

EULAR: EULAR is interested in expanding its mentoring support for RMD researchers. If you were asked to design a EULAR mentoring programme, what would it look like?

Elena Nikiphorou: It is important to be clear about the goals of such a programme, both for the mentees and mentors. A mentoring programme should be as open as possible and include early-stage career researchers and mid-level/senior professionals seeking mentorship. Some aspects that I find particularly important are, for example, the process of matching mentors and mentees. This could be achieved through an expert panel or short interviews to ensure that both parties fit well together. Another important aspect is the measurement of success. It is vital to keep track of how the mentor-mentee relationship develops, what the programme has allowed someone to achieve, and to identify some success cases. At some point a mentee may become a mentor him- or herself, that would be a great achievement.

Additional training for mentors could be integrated into the programme as well. Often the mentor's needs are less of a focus. They may want to learn about selecting mentees, aligning goals and expectations, communicating effectively with their mentees, and managing difficult conversations.

And on top of everything, of course, some formal, administrative, and organisational aspects need to be defined, such as the duration, meeting formats, resource needs, etc. In this line, educational webinars, workshops and/or online courses could become invaluable in training mentors to be.

Philipp Bosch: I fully agree with Elena. I think that mentor-mentee matchmaking will be the key element of such a programme. Mentor-mentee speed-networking could also be helpful. I like the concept of speed-networking because often, a short conversation allows you to get a sense if you want to work with a person. Combined with funding, such a programme could serve as the foundation for longer-term mentorship commitments on specific research projects.

Related links:

- More information about the [EMEUNET peer mentoring programmes](#).
- More information about the [EULAR Research Centre](#).

If you have thoughts on programmes and services the EULAR Research Centre could offer to provide RMD research support, please contact research@eular.org.