

THE JOINT EUROPEAN MENTORING INITIATIVE PILOT: NAVIGATING NEW PLATFORMS FOR CONNECTING MOBILE RESEARCHERS

by Angela Bellia – Mentor, JEMI Pilot

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My experience with JEMI started this year at the Marie Curie Alumni Association Conference that took place in February in Leuven. During the Mentoring Session within this event, Viktoria Bodnarova informed us about the JEMI Mission and Vision, and about the involvement of the MCAA North America and beyond in this project. She highlighted how the JEMI project aims “To empower researchers from and [working] in Europe to achieve their full potential by providing a bottom-up comprehensive mentoring platform to build and maintain networks for their research career advancement.”

I immediately thought that this was an amazing initiative! In particular, I was struck by the idea of a transatlantic mentoring programme that brings together mentors and mentees from Europe and North America in order to enable scientists to build and maintain networks within the European science ecosystem, and to advance and develop their careers; it's a fantastic contribution to the global science community, encouraging support and collaboration with other researchers with connections to Europe.

For this reason, when the MCAA Academy team and Marco Masia contacted me, I quickly decided to become part of the JEMI Pilot in order to add my enthusiastic support to this important initiative. My idea is to give back some of what I have received in my research career thanks to Europe and European programmes; I wanted to help develop careers, personal growth, relationships, and offer guidance to my potential mentees.

Indeed, Europe has supported me throughout my research career. Thanks to European funding programmes, I have been able to make a strong contribution to the advancement of my research field, and I have developed new skills through my active membership of the Marie Curie Alumni Association. This global network of researchers is open to any past or present researchers supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions: this programme is one of the European Union's flagship initiatives to provide research grants supporting researchers at all stages of their career, across all disciplines.

Thanks to my first Marie Curie Global Fellowship, I carried out my research at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Although I have already built up substantial experience in research management in Europe and in mentoring at European and Italian universities, for me it has nonetheless been a stimulating experience to work at NYU, where I was in contact with a new culture with different practices and procedures for project management, as well as PhD student supervision and PostDoc mentoring. During this period, I enhanced and built bridges between North America and European scientific communities in my field of research. These bridges are enabling the development of my research career despite the fact that in my research fields – the social sciences and humanities – the number of permanent positions opening each year has decreased substantially; particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe, many researchers in these research fields struggle with high levels of job insecurity, impacting more strongly the experienced and talented researchers.

For this reason, and on the basis of my own personal experience (and resilience), I am deeply motivated to give my support in pursuing the JEMI objectives: to advocate for European intellectuals by providing a comprehensive range of learning opportunities, and to expand the scope of European-funded services and support available for European researchers worldwide, especially to the younger researchers in North America to connect back with Europe.

So, I enthusiastically accepted to volunteer my time to share my expertise in research career development through the Joint European Mentoring Initiative's pilot programme in North America. The JEMI team informed me that I had been matched with one of the 30+ mentee applications, making me one of their pairs for the pilot programme not only in order to help the mentee achieve their targeted goal for 2018, but also to be a great asset to their overall research career development.

Like all the mentors from the pilot programme, I was selected based on the recommendation and experience of MCAA and JEMI representatives. I have been paired with a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the American Museum of Natural History. Her name is Claudia Wultsch and she is an Austrian wildlife scientist with a broad interest in ecology and conservation of mammals occurring across fragmented and human-altered landscapes.

Our first Skype meeting, which took place in October, was a very positive and pleasant conversation. We soon felt comfortable, and we were very excited to meet. I listened to her attentively in order to understand her most urgent issues. She is working in New York, but her dream is to come back to Europe. I provided her encouragement, helping her to identify and assess her priorities at this moment of her life and her research career in order to develop it step by step. I discussed with her the opportunities offered by the European Programmes, and particularly by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowships. We also considered the possible host institution in Europe able to develop the potential of her international, interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial project. I hope to help her in preparing a successful proposal on the basis of my experience as a two-time winner of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowships. Seeing her be successful in this would make me very happy!

Meanwhile, the JEMI team asked us for the evaluation of our experience in order to know how the programme is going for us so far. They have now read our evaluations with great attention and have looked into how the team can best implement some of the suggestions the JEMI team received from me as a mentor, and from my mentee. I think that the next step will be to meet on JEMI's platform – appear.in/jeminet – and to connect us with one another to share our experiences so far.

In conclusion, I am confident that this wonderful initiative will allow European researchers outside of Europe to take advantage of best practices from other systems and to integrate it into their professional career development schemes. I think that JEMI will contribute to promoting broader pan-European and global collaborative projects. As a baseline platform, the JEMI project will highlight the quality of European academics and emphasise the value of European influence in the US and North America.

As Dimah Mahmoud argued, the JEMI project has a goal for the advancement of the European Research Area. Its full implementation is the main research policy objective of the European Union, as per Article 179 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The transnational research across the whole of Europe and beyond is instrumental not only for leveraging the achievement of a fully functional European Research Area, but also for Europe to be part of a Global Research Area that embraces open science in the coming years. For this reason, the JEMI project is not only a knowledge-sharing tool, but also an investment in a global-oriented European identity and ultimately, the future.