



# **MDHS Early Career Academic Town Hall 2025**

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## Introduction

Since its inception in 2020, the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) Early Career Academic (ECA) Network Town Hall has been an important yearly event. Its main objective is to foster open dialogue and exchange information between Faculty leadership and ECAs. Over the past five years, topics discussed during Town Halls have been centred on challenges faced by ECAs. These include concerns about job stability, funding opportunities, and avenues for professional development. The Town Hall also serves as an opportunity for Faculty leadership and ECAs to discuss and explore solutions to the challenges faced by ECAs. Finally, a key output of the annual Town Hall is the identification of key actions, to be undertaken by both Faculty leadership and ECAs, to improve outcomes for MDHS ECAs.

The following three themes were the focus of the 2025 MDHS ECA Town Hall. These themes were identified through an online survey disseminated to ECAs prior to the event:

1. Funding and job security
2. Career development
3. Mental health and well-being

The Town Hall was held on Tuesday, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2025, using a hybrid approach that comprised of both in-person (Melbourne Connect) and virtual (Zoom) attendees. It was chaired by Drs Rachael Moses (Research Associate, Melbourne Dental School) and Anne Hahn (Research Officer, School of Biomedical Sciences). The event received 104 registrations, with 46 attending either in-person or virtually on the day, while 11 ECAs contributed to the pre-event survey. While registration numbers remained stable, this presents a drop in participation and engagement with the event compared to 74 attendees last year and 30 survey responses.

The Town Hall began with presentations from the Faculty Executive Leadership team. These were focused on actions that have been taken to address issues raised during the 2024 Town Hall ([2024 report](#)). This was followed by a question-and-answer session centred around the three main themes (Funding and job security, career development, mental health and well-being). Questions were either asked in real-time by members of the audience or obtained from a pool of questions that had been posed by respondents in the earlier survey. An online polling tool (Slido) was also used to allow online and in-person participants to submit and vote on questions to ask

the Executive panel anonymously. Members of the ECA Town Hall subcommittee grouped and summarised online questions of a similar nature, which were then posed to the leadership team via the Town Hall chair. Due to time constraints, not all questions were able to be asked directly to the leadership team (see appendix for list of all submitted questions).

Three members from the Faculty Executive Leadership team attended the event to provide their insights and answer questions from ECAs. They were:

- Professor Matt Watt, Associate Dean (Research) & Acting Dean, MDHS
- Professor Elizabeth Molloy, Deputy Dean (Education), MDHS
- Professor Nicola Lautenschlager, Deputy Dean of People, Community & Partnerships, MDHS
- Mr Scott Brain, Human Resources

Having an HR representative on the panel was a novel addition this year, which was well received by ECAs and decided to be carried forward in the next years.

Of note, the Town Hall was held shortly after significant faculty-level personnel restructuring, which resulted in scheduling conflicts that prevented both Prof. Jane Gunn (Dean / Interim Provost) and Prof. Mike McGuckin (Deputy Dean / Acting Dean and Director Research Strategy), who had confirmed their attendance earlier in the year, from attending.

Invitations to attend the Town Hall were also extended to Heads of Schools, Departments, and Faculty-affiliated Institutes, Centres and Departments across MDHS; however, none attended the event.

## **Purpose of Report**

The primary aim of this report is to summarise the event and discussion from the 2025 MDHS ECA Network Town Hall, and to outline the key actionable items. This report also reviews the progress of actionable items that were raised during the 2024 Town Hall.

## Background

The University of Melbourne, as with other universities across Australia, has suffered significant financial repercussions over the past five years. There has been a substantial reduction in dedicated national research funding since the COVID-19 pandemic, and this has not increased following the pandemic [1]. Legislation around international student numbers in 2025 did further impact the Australian higher education sector with budget shortfalls (estimated around \$85 million across the university [2]). We recognise that the University of Melbourne, like other universities, anticipates significant economic challenges in the coming years.

Universities in Australia have engaged in several strategies to reduce operating expenses, some of which directly impact existing staff. These include promoting flexibility of remote working arrangements and increasing the rate of casual and fixed-term contracts. While some benefits have resulted from these arrangements—such as time and monetary savings from the reduced necessity to commute to work [3], the shift towards an increasingly casualised economy has had adverse effects on the wellbeing of ECAs both in and outside of work. The temporary nature of fixed-term contracts has had a negative impact on job security, career planning and advancement, and the mental health of employees [4].

It is important to note that the University of Melbourne has taken steps to go against these trends and promote better job stability among academics. The 2024 Enterprise Agreement (EA) aims to further reduce the FTE proportion of fixed-term and casual employment and increase the FTE proportion on continuing employment [5]. The new EA also included changes to the leave policy, employment categories, workforce planning, casual employment and the right to disconnect. Of direct relevance to ECAs was that the University plans to increase the number of staff on continuing contracts and is obliged to offer continuing employment to staff engaged in successive fixed-term contracts. While many of these changes are welcomed by ECAs, at the time of the Town Hall (ca. 16 months after the EA came into effect) changes were still relatively new and ECAs had varying levels of feedback on the usefulness of strategies in the Agreement.

It is also worth noting the attendance rate of ECAs at the Town Hall event relative to the total number of ECAs within MDHS and as mentioned above has dropped compared to previous years. Considering the discussion during the Town Hall event on time pressures experienced by ECAs,

it is likely that many found it challenging to devote time to the event. The ECA Network will continue to work closely with the Executive and ECA community to find further opportunities for discourse, as well as continuing to promote future Town Hall events.

## Summary of Presentations by Faculty Leadership

*Prof. Matt Watt:*

- Appreciated the work being done by ECAs and their contributions to faculty committees
- Announced a second iteration of the ECA well-being study together with Monash is in planning
- Presented on the ECA work force profile including work focus and employment type between 2021 and 2025. Highlighted the shift in employment type by reduction of fixed term contracts to continuing or (mostly) continuing research–contingent contracts.
- Emphasized that promotion outcomes paint positive overall picture and there was an increase of applications from ECAs. Applications to Level B has a 98% success rate (94% to Level C). Also noted that education focused academics have disproportionate rates of unsuccessful applications, something the faculty is trying to improve on.
- Highlighted the “Supporting Women in MDHS (SWiM)” program for Level B-E staff.
- Updated on funding opportunities for ECA:
  - UoM schemes:
    - Early Career Grants: ca. 60% successful
    - McKenzie (and other UoM postdoctoral fellowships): only ca. 4 per round for MDHS
  - External Grants:
    - DECRA: ca. 5-8 per year. (ca. 25-30 submissions per year)
    - Future Fellowship: very low success-rates (ca 10-14 submissions per year)
    - ARC DECRA and DP schemes overall very low success rates.
    - NHMRC Investigator grants and Ideas Grants, highly unlikely for Level A but Level B and C likely to be more successful.
  - MDHS schemes:
    - Early Career Conference Support Scheme (highly successful, 60-70% of applicants get funded)

MDHS Research Bridging Research Fellowship for near miss NHMRC and ARC schemes and personal circumstances (3 awarded in 2025)

EMCR Catalyst Grants (Early 12 and Mid 8 Career Categories awarded in 2025). Ca. 45% success rate (note: not further specified whether this is before or after successful EOI stage)

- New programs: Dean's Innovation Grant, Innovation Seed Grants, Innovator Awards
- Diversity and Inclusion grants: UoM Research Impetus Grants (Career Interruption Fellowships) - 12 awarded in 2025, MDHS Career Continuity Grants, Momentum Fellowships and Diversity and Inclusion Grants
- Total investment of Faculty & Central University funding ca. 6.5 million for Education and Teaching and Research.
- Faculty research development initiatives for Ideas Grants, MRFF Grants, Investigator Grants, and Discovery Project Grants

*Prof. Liz Malloy*

- Mentioned ECAs in learning and teaching are either Academic specialist, Education Focus and Education and Research and also Research only are involved in teaching
- Encouraged teaching participation of research only
- UoM focus is an investment in educators and education innovation with communities of practice, (climate, online, indigenous, future of assessment working group), reach out to Timothy Beaumont (Academic Director of Educator Development) if interested in any of these.
- Examples for ECAs being involved in programs to lift education is "Feedback Fever", to improve student satisfaction with feedback.
- The MDHS Collaborative Practice Curriculum, represents a fundamental shift in education and supporting development of educational innovation (i.e. in collaboration with the Melbourne Business school: BASTAS Academy for Health Leadership courses), learning and teaching innovation grants from the UoM, annual teaching and learning conference
- Referred to the Educational Excellence Framework with standards and guiding focus

*Mr. Scott Brain – Interim Director of HR for MDHS*

- Emphasises that the redeployment process for continuing (research-contingent) positions is not a recruitment service but rather a mechanism to support the University in meeting its obligation under the Enterprise Agreement (EA). It can identify any suitable vacant roles that may be available during the four-week notice period.
- Mentioned that changes to recruitment practices include that positions need to undergo internal advertisement before going external.

## Summary of Q&A Dialogue

Questions raised by ECAs were centred around three themes: (i) funding and job security, (ii) career development, and (iii) mental health and well-being.

### 1. Job Security and Funding

- *Is there a way to get feedback on internal grant submissions?*
  - In general, feedback can be asked for but there is no formal mechanism for everyone to receive feedback (large numbers of application and reduced workload burden on voluntary reviewers was given as explanation).
  - There were suggestions that providing more formalised feedback forms and scoring that can easily be shared with applicants would be helpful. This was noted as possible and feasible.
- *How can research-only staff based off campus be involved in teaching?*
  - For example, Robin Slattery, works with researchers off campus for mentoring purposes. There are also online lectures, tutoring, developing onboarding systems for students, mentoring, EduYak and more.
  - As a first point of contact, one should reach out to their Head of Department to ask what is needed and what opportunities are available.
- *What are the expectations around the 10% teaching commitment for research-only staff?*
  - This only applies to continuing staff (not fixed-term, note: the expectations for continuing research-contingent staff are not entirely clear at this point). Overall, 20% of activities should be another work focus than the main focus (i.e. for research focus this can be leadership and service including committee work or teaching).

- A question on whether there are any guidelines or mechanisms that cover the shortfall (time or monetary wise) on research-efforts. The panel said this is to be negotiated between staff and primary supervisors, and there might be ways to offset hours spent on education through other means. It was noted that the funding for continuing education jobs is likely to remain stable over the next years so exploring different forms of how to contribute to education and enhancing student experience is advised.
- This is encouraged by the university, but opportunities might also depend on the cultural environment of the immediate work environment and whether it supports the wider vision of the university to educate and train the next generation of researchers.
- *Is there a possibility to trigger the redeployment process earlier than 4 weeks before the contract end and if not successful is there a compensation package?*
  - Early conversations with supervisors on research funding are recommended. The relocation scheme is restricted to the 4-week notice and redeployment period. Compensation is based on years of service including entitlements and benefits for continuing staff based on the EA. It was noted that fixed-term staff have no severance for fixed-term contracts (in contrast to other universities).

## **2. Career Development**

- *How to incorporate non-traditional research output to contribute to career narrative?*
  - Make sure to convince the panel of fellow-academics that review your application, write your narrative so that they early on get an idea about you and your career. Rely on your professional network to help crafting your narrative. Create a document to collect all career-relevant information.
- *How to navigate potential competition and conflict of interest between PIs and ECAs for opportunities (i.e. authorships, funding etc)?*
  - Think about the rationale and reasoning behind your request, rehearse the conversations. Consider alternatives to explore to get advice and who could be asked for another opinion.
  - Prepare for the conversations and communicate openly, try to benefit from your supervisors network and lack of communication can be problematic.

- Be clear where you need mentorship and when you need sponsorship. In an ideal supervisor relationship, sponsoring and matching opportunities is a shared interest between ECA and supervisor.
- Participate in the “[Early Career Leadership course](#)” offered by MDHS
- MDHS will also role out a new “Academic Career Support model” across the faculty as there is recognition that there should be a wider support network beyond primary supervisor / people manager, to access mentors, as well as onboarding buddies and connect academics more to senior academic leads (i.e. Head of Departments).

### **3. Physical and Mental Wellbeing**

- *How to find a mentor? Maybe also for the re-deployment scheme?*
  - Soon, there will be a more formalised way to find mentors, but in the meantime look proactively to find peer-mentors or senior mentors. Explore what happens outside your school or faculty. Peer mentoring can be a good start. Be brave and be pro-active about finding mentors and reaching out to them i.e. the SWIM program or join the Early Career Network
- *How to provide the funds for Level B if promoted?*
  - You have the right to go for promotion any time, the responsibility lies with the university. Seek input from supervisors and Head of Departments, if lab heads worry about this but it shouldn't hold applications back.
- *Are there plans from the faculty side for long(er)-term opportunities for ECAs?*
  - External funders unlikely to change and thus short-term contracts will probably remain the norm. On the faculty-level, short- to mid-term understood as problem but no immediate solutions in sight with the current research environment in Australia.
  - It was noted that supervisors have incentives to make sure their ECRs are striving and remain employed, so this is a joint interest of the supervisor and ECR.
  - In general, remain aware of the funding situation and ask about it early on, have a Plan B.

### **Actionable Recommendations**

1. Provide more feedback for internal grant applications to all applicants

2. Provide guidelines that could help streamline the time commitment, documentation and formal recognition of the 20% non-primary activity (i.e. teaching and leadership and service for research focus staff or vice-versa) and for which staff this is particularly relevant (i.e. research-focus fixed-term vs. continuing staff)
3. Increase the availability and awareness of information around the processes and supports available to ECAs who feel unsupported by their supervisors in pursuing their own academic and career goals, or in accessing professional development opportunities i.e. mentorship, more funding opportunities, regular check-in opportunities with senior faculty members / Head of Departments
4. Provide updates and involve ECA input in the new “Academic Career Support Model”

## Progress since the 2024 Town Hall

1. *Provide an information page about the Redeployment Scheme, which seeks to find staff alternative employment within MDHS following the expiration of grant funding. Specifically, it would be helpful to provide more details on who is eligible for the Scheme, how the Scheme should be accessed, progress on how it has been implemented and importantly, contact details so that eligible staff not yet included in the Scheme are able to seek support.*  
**Status: In Progress / Delayed**

This topic was addressed during this year’s Q&A as there was no update on an information page about the eligibility of the re-deployment scheme. Match success so far seemed to have been low but numbers were unclear. The inclusion of someone from HR on the panel was seen favourably and will be carried forward in the next iteration of the Town Hall. Update to be provided by April 2026.

2. *Provide sustainable funding to support schools/departments to develop and run structured mentoring programs (such as those in MSPGH and MMS) for helping ECAs identify and achieve strategic career pursuits while fulfilling their functional job responsibilities.*  
**Status: In Progress**

A lack of mentoring opportunities especially for more junior ECAs that are not yet eligible for the SWIM program was raised again in this year’s Town Hall. Some Schools and Departments are running smaller programs and the MDHS ECA Network committee is working on collating information on mentoring opportunities. Update to be provided by the next Townhall.

3. *Provide an update on the financial impact of the international student cap on funding on ECA-specific schemes (e.g., Early Career Research Grants, McKenzie Fellowships etc).*

**Status: Complete**

This was addressed during the Town Hall and in the presentation by Prof. Watt. There seem to have been stable numbers of these grants and MDHS seeks to keep the funding for ECR activities consistent.

4. *Increase the availability and awareness of information around the processes and supports available to ECAs who feel unsupported by their supervisors in pursuing their own academic and career goals, or in accessing professional development opportunities.*

**Status: In Progress**

This was raised again during this year's Town Hall and seems to remain somewhat unsatisfactory for ECAs who need support. There seems to be a disconnect between available services and ECAs seeking them out. Faculty leadership and the MDHS ECA Network will try to provide better information of these opportunities. This also ties back to the mentoring offers. Update to be provided by June 2026.

5. *Continue to provide data for the dashboard on a yearly basis. In the absence of a digital dashboard, information could be provided to the co-chairs at quarterly meetings.*

**Status: In Progress / Delayed**

This was addressed during Mr Scott Brain's update. It was noted that so far there is no tracking of career progressions for ECAs available. Further, there is no data on successful relocations for ECAs on research-contingent contracts available. Both, HR and faculty leadership are open to provide more reporting on this in 2026. Update to be provided by April 2026.

### **Commitments from the Executive**

- **To be added here** -

## Appendix

Link to recording:  [video1745797209.mp4](#)

[Questions submitted via slido](#)

[Registration overview](#)

[Post-event survey](#)

## References

1. For example: <https://asmr.org.au/news/asrms-submission-to-the-draft-national-health-and-medical-research-strategy-consultation/> (assessed January 2026), <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-australia-government-agencies-2026-1-success-rate-for-nhmrc-ideas-grants-dips-below-10-per-cent/> (assessed January 2026)
2. Email from Acting Vice Chancellor on 9th September 2024.
3. The University of Melbourne. *Flexible working*. 2023 [cited 2024 10 November]: Available from: <https://mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/advancing-health-2030/community/mdhs-careers-at-melbourne/support-and-development-hub/flexible-working#overview>
4. Lee, M., Coutts, R., Fielden, J., Hutchinson, M., Lakeman, R., Mathisen, B., ... & Phillips, N. (2022). Occupational stress in university academics in Australia and New Zealand. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 44(1), 57-71.
5. University of Melbourne Enterprise Agreement 2024 [cited 2024 13 November]. Available from: [https://staff.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/4902810/2024-enterprise-agreement.pdf](https://staff.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/4902810/2024-enterprise-agreement.pdf)