

MDHS Early Career Academics

2022 MDHS ECA Town Hall Summary



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Introduction

As a regular feature of the University of Melbourne MDHS ECA group's calendar, the annual MDHS ECA Town Hall provides an opportunity for open dialogue between Faculty leadership and early career staff. This may include recent changes in the academic landscape as well regular challenges faced at this career stage. Collectively, we sought collaborative solutions and actions that Faculty leadership and ECAs can take to address these.

The 2022 program centred on three themes: equity, representation and advocacy, and career development. The program began with presentations from the Executive Leadership team on these themes, followed by a question-and-answer session including pre-selected questions and live questions from the audience. An online polling tool was used to allow online and in-person participants to submit and vote on questions anonymously (see Appendices for list of all submitted questions).

The meeting was held on Wednesday 19th of October, 2022, at Melbourne Connect and online, being chaired by Dr Jenn Lacy-Nichols (Research Fellow, Centre for Health Policy) and Dr George Taiaroa (Research Fellow, Doherty Institute). Panelists featured from the executive leadership team of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS), included:

- Professor Jane Gunn, Dean, MDHS
- Professor Mike McGuckin, Deputy Dean, MDHS
- Professor Alicia Spittle, Associate Dean Research, MDHS

The ECA group extended an invitation to attend to other Faculty and School leaders from the Schools, with attendance from: Professor Nancy Baxter (Head of the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health), Professor Natalie Hannan (Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion), Professor Rob Hester (Head of the Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences) and Professor Marilys Guillemain (Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching).

Summary Report Purpose

Here, we outline the potentially actionable items identified at the 2022 MDHS ECA Town Hall. These include new approaches and initiatives as well as those which build on areas highlighted in previous years. We also reflect on the items from previous annual town halls and progress made towards these.

Context

As Australia and countries around the world return to 'pre-COVID' working conditions, we are presented with an important opportunity to reflect on how institutions such as universities, including the University of Melbourne, can build back better, or as Marmot proposed, 'build back fairer' (Marmot et al. 2020). The COVID pandemic has exposed many cracks in how universities operate, including a heavily casualised and precarious professional and academic workforce.

The impacts of the above on the job security of early career academics (ECAs), opportunities for career advancement, university culture and individual mental health and wellbeing are increasingly recognised (Schneiders 2022, Jones 2023). Although in part a reflection of limited national research funding, we believe there are local opportunities to better manage the landscape of early career research at the University of Melbourne.

Actionable items and recommendations

- 1. Cosponsor and expand ECA and Research Fellowships:** MDHS Faculty to co-sponsor fellowships with Chancellery, Schools and/or Departments to increase the number of local fellowships offered. This could be tied to near-miss candidates for NHMRC and ARC fellowships, increasing the likelihood of future funding success.
- 2. Make continuing contracts commonplace:** For grants of a specific duration, make it standard for relevant contracts to cover the length of the grant, such as a four-year contract for a four-year grant. This will provide increased financial security for ECAs.
- 3. Standardise career progression activities as part of performance development reviews:** Having guidance on the nature of performance development activities offered or supported by MDHS will be valuable, as will having ECAs encouraged to pursue these by supervisors as part of annual performance development reviews. The Faculty and Schools should also clarify the appropriate fraction of time set aside for these activities.
- 4. ECA committee representation:** Ensure representative ECAs continue to have a formal seat at the table for all faculty, school and departmental committees. This will provide executives an opportunity to hear ECA perspectives and ensure that ECAs are aware of upcoming initiatives.

- 5. Include ECAs in advocacy efforts to increase research funding:** Provide meaningful opportunities for ECAs to participate in MDHS or University of Melbourne discussions with NHMRC, ARC, MRFF and the federal government to advance advocacy efforts. This may include efforts to increase national research funding, which although a challenging and long-term policy ask, would be a transformative change for many ECAs.
- 6. Provide regular progress reports:** Having semi-annual updates on faculty progress to implement positive changes, including broader University of Melbourne efforts to increase the number and percent of staff on continuing contracts, would be reassuring. As part of this, MDHS leadership could collect and share data on key metrics such as the number of ECAs on fixed or continuing contracts.
- 7. Continued funding for professional development:** Faculty to provide continued and expanded funding for ECAs to attend professional development opportunities. For example, revitalising the MDHS ECA leadership development program, or offering courses on media training and writing for news outlets which would allow ECAs to diversify their training opportunities and outputs.

Thematic synopsis

Many questions raised by ECAs were in line with the above three themes of the 2022 MDHS ECA Town Hall – equity, representation and advocacy, and career development.

Equity – the MDHS executive was asked how it would measure progress on its commitments to improve equity for career development, promotion and funding. Additional concerns were raised about how best to balance the return to campus with the need for many ECAs to work from home due to caring responsibilities, illness, or other circumstances.

Representation and advocacy – While noted that there was good ECA representation on many of the leadership committees at both the Faculty and School levels, it was proposed that an ECA could attend the Faculty executive meetings where relevant as well. Opportunities for ECAs and the University of Melbourne more broadly to play a larger role in advocacy to the state and federal government regarding the need for more secure funding models were sought; the current competitive grant model is not seen as sustainable going forward.

Career development – The most frequently raised questions related to job security, in particular the increasing reliance on ‘soft’ grant money and what happens if and when this runs out.

Faculty leadership noted that the University of Melbourne was working on strategies to support more permanent positions, although flagged that financial resources were a key constraint. Proposed future resources included revenue from University of Melbourne-owned commercial enterprises, such as other universities have done.

Concerns were raised about the ethics of recruiting more PhD students when statistically most will not have successful careers in academic research. Professor Mike McGuckin noted that University of Melbourne has developed a RHD internship program to support graduates to identify opportunities outside the academic sector, although there are concerns about whether this initiative distracts from the issue of systemic job insecurity within academia.

Progress from the previous town hall

Areas of productive focus following previous town halls include development of an MDHS ECA sub-committee, with the Associate Dean of Research's newsletter now having created a dedicated sub-section focused on ECAs related to this, as well as continuing the previous workplace and culture survey and expanding ECA representation on Faculty committees and hiring panels.

Areas highlighted in the previous town hall which remain to be addressed include a workshop related to the University of Melbourne's financial model, and on non-traditional funding sources and opportunities in collaboration with RIC or advancement. The MDHS ECA group would like to see these workshops take place, although is not actively pursuing these at this time.

Commitments from the Executive

The MDHS Executive committed to working with the MDHS ECA group to address the above actionable items and recommendations outlined in this report. We thank them again for their time and engagement and we look forward to working with them to increase the representation and support of ECAs across the Faculty.

Marmot, M., Allen, J., Goldblatt, P., Herd, E. and Morrison, J., 2021. Build Back Fairer. London: Institute of Health Equity, Available online: <https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/upload/publications/2020/Build-back-fairer-theCOVID-19-Marmot-review.pdf>

Schneiders, B., 2022. A high-status 'gig economy': How we have failed our researchers. The Age, Available online: <https://www.theage.com.au/national/a-high-status-gig-economy-how-we-have-failed-our-researchers-20220720-p5b347.html>

Jones, N., 2023. Early-career researchers in Australia are miserable at work. Nature, Available online: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00193-z>

Appendices

Online questions submitted during the meeting

Responses – Part One	Upvotes	Downvotes
What do the continuing (funding contingent) contracts actually mean in practice when a grant/fellowship runs out?	10	0
I don't want to take on a PhD student when I can't even guarantee my own job security...	8	0
50% of level B and 60% of level A with less than a year remaining on their contract is a lot of people without job security. What can be done to improve job security? Or do	5	0
There are many EMCAs who parent young children, have caring responsibilities or have protected characteristics. Do you think Associate Dean of Diversity and Inclusion for MDHS should be part of future town hall events?	5	0
Most ECRs are employed on other peoples grants. Support to "buy out" our substantive role for 1day/week (or similar) so that we can work on our own grant applications, or our UniMelb ECR grant, during normal business hours would be very helpful. Could this ever be possible?	4	0
Short-term contracts also impact ECAs in that they don't have opportunities to supervise HDR students.	4	0
The strong push to return to campus has led to many hybrid events being replaced by in-person excluding people with caring responsibilities or those with underlying conditions who remain concerned about the ongoing pandemic. How is the Faculty ensuring equity of access for these staff?	3	0
Innovation is a creative endeavour that requires time to foster. ECAs are phenomenally time poor due to the heavy/unpaid administrative load that is placed on them. How is the Faculty fostering innovation? Is this just another way to put the onus on individual researcher to secure funding?	3	0
What is our university/faculty doing in terms of advocating the government for more research funding? And what do you expect will happen to levels of funding?	3	0

Responses – Part Two	Upvotes	Downvotes
Couple of issues about supervision is ECRS. One is PDR is purely a tick box exercise and no valuable career discussion takes place. Allocated 30 minutes and paperwork done in that time. Second is that a number of us have no supervision from	3	0
Important to also consider people NOT at Parkville and also people working across multiple projects and potentially across faculties with this push towards cross faculty collaboration	2	0
What are you doing to support ECAs that live and work in rural communities? They are often isolated from the larger university and face some unique problems that can impact career trajectory.	2	0
Why aren't level A to B promotions a tick box exercise during the annual performance review given all the material to make the decision has been collated and discussed?	2	0
Representation at the table matters. Having a voice in the room while decisions are made ensures that issues related to unrepresented groups are actively discussed and considered. Is there ECA and student rep on Executive committees at Faculty / School / Department level? If not, why not?	2	0
The University spends a lot of money to keep the "Platforms" running, and then charge people with grants for their services. Could some of this money be spent to help Departments support their fixed-term ECAs (e.g. bridge funding)?	1	0
Are there any other potential support (other than Career Interruption Fellowships) from the faculty, for mid career researchers who have prioritised parental responsibility and would like to get his/her foot back in academia?	1	0
What incentives do the MDHS executive have in mind to ensure that annual progress reviews are done to a high standard and don't just become a tick box exercise?	1	0
When will MDHS align EMCA contract durations with the time it takes to embed impact from research?	1	0
What's the benefit for PhD students doing unpaid internships with government, industry, etc when it takes time out of their PhD 4 years? Wouldn't they be better off doing a placement / getting an entry level job with the group after they finish / rather than doing a PhD?	1	0

Responses – Part Three	Upvotes	Downvotes
Better costing for grants: What are senior execs doing to lobby NHMRC for better PSPs? We tie ourselves in knots trying to cost things properly with very limited support from RAO for costings	1	0
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In discussing the need to increase the uptake of annual reviews and subsequent discussions of professional development, how much of the onus to initiate and drive these conversations should rest with ECAs compared with their supervisors?	1	0
We talk about ECAs but what kind of support and integration is given to those who are teaching only or Research and Teaching?	1	0
There's this emphasis on internal collaboration and partnership but how are you supposed to create enduring collaborations and partnerships when your collaborators are also on fixed term contracts??	0	0
PAY THEM FOR THEIR TEACHING	0	0
Given the current state of academia and the challenges faced by ECAs and academics at higher levels, I'd struggle to recommend anyone enter a PhD program or similar unless they're really personally motivated by their topic. Seems like they'd be better off picking a different career / life path.	0	0
Some of these issues are beyond our University, are we lobbying the government for support and change?	0	0
This glib response from Mike McGuckin about WEHI funding from drug companies is just completely against the whole ethos of doing research for patient benefit where if you want interventions to be accessible you need to make them free at point of use.	0	0
Following NHMRC outcomes, I believe there was mention of bridging support being available. As Mike mentioned, for many ECA's their contracts are coming to an end and so for those who missed out on IG's it'd be great to know the what/when/how of this	0	0
It seems to me that PhD students are relatively well-supported, given the financial incentives to Departments for them to finish, and there is no such incentive to keep ECAs. Is there something that could be done to address this discrepancy?	0	0