



MDHS Early Career Academic Town Hall 2024

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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 of information between Faculty leadership and ECAs. Over the past four years, topics discussed during Town Halls have been centred on challenges faced by ECAs. These include concerns about the job stability, funding opportunities, and avenues for professional development. The Townhall 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 2024 MDHS ECA Town Hall. These themes were identified through an online survey disseminated to ECAs four months 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, 11th September 2024, using a hybrid approach that comprised of both in-person (Graduate House) and virtual (Zoom) attendees. It was chaired by Dr Kate Cameron (Research Fellow, School of Health Sciences). The event received 107 registrations, with 74 attending either in-person or virtually on the day, while 30 ECAs contributed to the pre-event survey.

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 2023 Town Hall. This was followed by a question-and-answer session centred around the three main themes. 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 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 Townhall subcommittee grouped and summarised online questions of a similar nature, which were then posed to the leadership team via the Townhall chair. Due to time constraints, not all

questions were able to be asked directly to the leadership team (see Appendix I 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 Mike McGuckin, Acting Dean, MDHS
- Professor Liz Molloy, Deputy Dean (Education), MDHS
- Professor Amy Jordan, Associate Dean (Research), MDHS

Invitations to attend the Town Hall were also extended to Heads of Schools, Departments, and Faculty-affiliated Institutes, Centres and Departments across MDHS.

Purpose of Report

The primary aim of this report is to summarise the events and discussion from the 2024 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 2023 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. In September 2024, the federal government proposed an international student cap which will likely further exacerbate these financial concerns (however it remains uncertain whether Parliament will pass the legislation). Nonetheless, at the time of writing we are aware that MDHS is taking steps to impose limits on 2025 budgets in preparation for anticipated budget shortfalls (estimated around \$85 million across the university¹). Regardless of the specific budget impact, 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

¹ Email from Acting Vice Chancellor on 9th September 2024.

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 [2], 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 [3].

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. In April this year, the 2024 Enterprise Agreement (EA) came into effect. One of the primary aims of the EA was to further reduce the FTE proportion of fixed-term and casual employment and increase the FTE proportion on continuing employment [4]. 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 (less than 6 months after the EA came into effect) changes were relatively new and ECAs had varying levels of familiarity with the new 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. 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 ECAN 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.

Actionable Recommendations

- 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.
- 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.

- 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).
- 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.
- 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 their first quarterly meeting.

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

Reductions in university research funding due to the economic challenges brought about by the pandemic are a sector-wide problem. While the economy has been recovering, the government's recent announcement of an international student cap will undoubtedly have negative financial repercussions through limiting international tuition fee revenue - which makes up approximately half of the total revenue obtained by most universities in Australia. The direct impact of this cap on MDHS' revenue is not expected to be huge because it receives a smaller percentage of international fee-paying students. However, the Faculty will likely have to absorb some of the overall financial impact experienced across the University. Notwithstanding, MDHS has been working to increase the proportion of continuing contracts while simultaneously reducing the proportion of fixed-term contracts. However, contracts can only be offered or extended when there are sufficient funds to honour it.

The push to increase the proportion of continuing contracts also means that a greater percentage of staff are eligible for severance payments if they are made redundant. To maximise employee retention, MDHS is in the process of creating a 'Redeployment Scheme' which helps staff coming off project grants or fellowships to find another appropriate job role within the Faculty's ecosystem of schools, departments, or affiliated research institutes. An online platform that helps to connect employees whose contracts are finishing with other

opportunities within MDHS is currently under development. Currently, internal job movements are still heavily based on word-of-mouth. It is therefore hoped that such a scheme will enable MDHS employees to find other roles within broader university networks.

2. Career Development

Research-focused ECAs expressed that training targeted at helping them to develop from researchers to research group leaders would be desirable, as this is rarely covered during postgraduate training. Among education-focused ECAs, the lack of time to pursue career development opportunities—due to the time-consuming nature of teaching responsibilities—was a commonly cited barrier to professional development. Furthermore, education-focused staff are also expected to conduct research projects on teaching and learning. As a result, education-focused ECAs find themselves having to carve out time after office hours for activities related to research or professional development.

In response to these challenges, several specific resources were recommended. Within the University, there is an Early Career Academic Leadership program developed by Prof Rob Moodie and A/Prof Claudia Marck. This highly acclaimed workshop-style training is conducted annually. However, it is worth noting that there are limited places available. This program provides information on maximising efficiency in completing functional work with the objective of freeing up more time for strategic career pursuits.

Pursuing formal teaching qualifications that are currently offered free of charge to University staff may also help to acquire or refine their skills in teaching and public speaking, both of which are highly relevant in the academia job market. Attaining additional qualifications, such as the Melbourne Teaching Certificate or Certificate for Small Group Teaching provided by UoM, are an effective way of setting oneself apart from other applicants for academic positions (especially those with a fraction of teaching workload). From a practical perspective, the coursework requirements can be feasibly completed in six months. Other professional development events for early career teachers were recommended including the annual MDHS Learning and Teaching Conference, the MDHS Peer Observation of Teaching Scheme and the MDHS 'EduYak' series to discuss key issues in education and teacher development (held 5 x/year within the Faculty, and open to teachers, education researchers, professional staff involved in teaching and students).

3. Mental Health and Wellbeing

While Mental Health and Wellbeing was designated as its own theme, it is important to note that aspects of mental health and wellbeing intersect with the two above schemes, as job

security, funding and career development have a direct impact wellbeing of ECAs. This was reflected in the wording of questions submitted online during the Town Hall, and via the pre-event survey (some of which expressed frustration and perceived Faculty indifference to ECA challenges). This was also supported by findings from the recent Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey and the impact of this survey was highlighted by Leadership in the context of successful advocacy efforts. Any changes or planned changes related to the formal report for this survey were not discussed.

The stress of workload was discussed, with recognition that more work needs to be done to support ECAs to structure their work time to enable achievement of tasks, time for professional development, but also to ensure work is not encroaching on personal time. In response to addressing stress and challenges, the advice from the Faculty Leadership Team focused on working effectively with our current strengths and resources, such as learning from mentors or from others successful in your field.

Feedback from the post-event survey indicated that ECAs would like more time to discuss mental health and wellbeing with Faculty leadership. However, while mental health and wellbeing were rated as highly important for ECAs, few submitted questions on this topic on the day. Different formats for discussing mental health and wellbeing may need to be explored to better suit ECA needs.

Progress since the 2023 Town Hall

In this section, we provide an update on the progress and opportunities for further action on the seven actionable recommendations that were proposed during last year's Town Hall:

1. Allow ECAs to present regularly at Faculty Executive meetings:

Status: complete

In the past year, ECAs have delivered nine presentations at Faculty Executive meetings. Of these, 6 were research-focused while 3 were teaching-focused.

2. Develop a dashboard of metrics to track specific targets relating to ECAs' career success:

Status: in progress

This dashboard was developed to track target metrics for ECA success across MDHS and assist in identifying further key opportunities for improvement. Relevant data was presented by Prof Mike McGuckin at this year's Town Hall. It provided a summary of (i) levels and work

categories of ECAs, including the proportion of staff on fixed-term versus continuing contracts, (ii) year-on-year success rates for various ECA-specific internal grant schemes within MDHS, and (iii) year-on-year success rates for NHMRC and MRFF grant schemes among applicants at the ECA-level, and (iv) promotion success rates from Level A to B, and from Level B to C.

The ECA network will be working with the Director of Research Support and Evaluation on making this information available to all MDHS ECAs via the intranet and agreeing on how frequently the data will be updated to enable monitoring.

3. Continue to nurture open communication pathways between ECAs and Executive with a commitment to supporting ECAs' career progression, job security and wellbeing

Status: in progress

While there are existing professional development opportunities (e.g., online learning modules, educational talks) targeted at helping PhD students and new ECAs understand how to thrive in academia or industry, junior researchers have expressed that they would benefit if this information was more easily accessible. High turnout and engagement with EMCA week suggest there is broad interest in career development programs if correctly targeted.

Concerning job security, there have been promising changes in the right direction, such as reduced fraction of fixed-term and casual contracts, and growth in the fraction of continuing contracts. It would also be helpful to follow up on the impact of the findings generated from the Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey (circulated earlier this year), and to continue to monitor progress around ECA wellbeing.

Despite the existing pathways and resources that are available, the ECAN steering committee will continue to work to ensure that ECAs do not miss out on relevant opportunities that could benefit them.

4. Maintain and expand opportunities for ECAs to receive funding for projects they lead.

Status: in progress

It is also recognised that many ECAs are ineligible to apply for grants that will not cover their salaries due to having less than 12 months remaining on their contracts. This ineligibility to

obtain funding, in turn, restricts ECAs' ability to lead projects and hinders their career progression.

As of 2024, MDHS has piloted and introduced four new funding schemes that are eligible for ECAs up to Level C. These include the:

1. MDHS Innovation Seed Grants: project funding up to \$50K for 1 year.
2. MDHS Innovator Awards: project funding up to \$100K for 2 years.
3. EMCR Project Catalyst Grants: Allocated a total budget of \$600K, this scheme is intended to improve upon the previous Seeding Ideas Grant scheme. It aims to support more EMCRs to undertake new research ideas, rather than just the very top near-miss project applicants from other internal and external grant schemes. (Introduced in 2023, but increased budget in 2024)
4. MDHS Career Continuity Grants

5. Make continuing contracts commonplace:

Status: in progress (trending to successful)

MDHS has been working to change the workforce profile to improve job security. Since October 2023, there has been a 51% increase in continuing employment employees, and a 27% reduction in fixed-term employees within MDHS.

In terms of academic promotion, there has been a 171% rise in applications for promotion to Levels B and C from 2018- 2024.

6. Include ECAs in advocacy efforts to increase research funding:

Status: in progress

At present, ECAs are represented in the following Faculty-level committees in MDHS.

1. Faculty Research, Learning & Teaching, Engagement, People & Culture, Diversity & Inclusion Committees.
2. Faculty Research Impact Working Group
3. Faculty Innovation & Enterprise Steering Committee
4. Graduate Research Committee

ECAs have also been involved in high-visibility platforms such as conference planning committees, leadership appointment selection panels, and grant review panels.

One possibility for future exploration might be to tap on resources beyond FMDHS to support advocacy efforts for research support—such as the UoM government relations team.

7. Continued funding for professional development:

Status: in progress

We welcome the suggestion to participate in and expand the MDHS Leadership program co-delivered by Profs Moodie, Marck and Alisic and agree the program is spectacular. We note that it has been over-subscribed since 2024 (with the 2025 scheme not opening applications as it was already fully allocated to those who missed out in 2024). Further, the program is run and coordinated on a voluntary basis. To ensure a sustainable program, we suggest that MDHS provide funding to support the administrative task to coordinating the program, which may also enable it to be expanded (or run twice in a year) to allow more ECAs to participate.

The MDHS Executive Team is 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. We appreciate their inclusiveness and the grant opportunities they have made available to ECAs. We look forward to working with them to increase the representation and support of ECAs across the Faculty.

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, alongside continued monitoring and discussion as the ECA landscape evolves. The Executive would like to acknowledge the benefits of including Teaching & Research and Education focussed ECAs into this remit, as it better represents the diversity of the ECA workforce. We thank them again for their time and engagement. We appreciate their inclusiveness and the grant opportunities they have made available to ECAs. We look forward to working with them to increase the representation and support of ECAs across the Faculty.

References

1. Email from Acting Vice Chancellor on 9th September 2024.
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