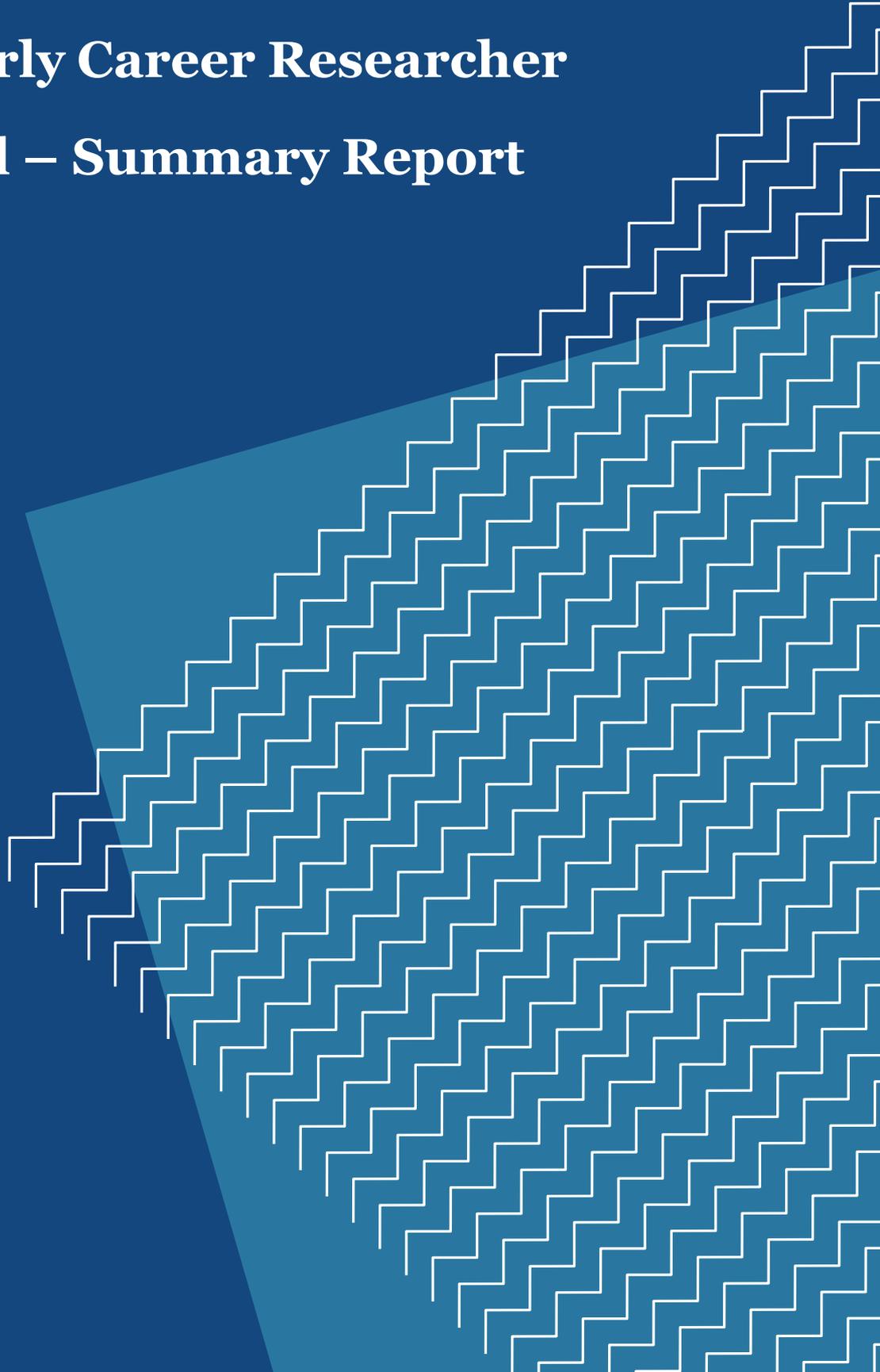# MDHS Early Career Researcher Town Hall – Summary Report

7 December 2021

MDHS ECR Town Hall Summary Report

Introduction

On Thursday 18 November 2021, the University of Melbourne's MDHS Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network held an online forum chaired by Dr Andrew Watt (*Research Fellow & Co-Head, Australian Venom Research Unit*) and featuring the Executive Leadership team of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS), including:

- **Professor Jane Gunn**, Dean, MDHS

- **Professor Mike McGuckin**, Deputy Dean, MDHS

- **Professor Alicia Spittle**, Associate Dean Research, MDHS

This provided Early and Mid-Career Researchers (EMCRs) from across the Faculty to share concerns and challenges with the Executive, centered on two themes: follow up on progress on the challenges and opportunities raised at the 2020 Town Hall, and the Faculty response to the EMCR Workplace Survey findings. The session was audience-led and EMCRs could submit questions live. The forum provided an avenue for parties to explore potential strategies and solutions to address the highlighted gaps and challenges for EMCRs and the Faculty more broadly.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a considerable toll on the research community for over two years. While the impact has been widespread across the research sector, this has been acutely felt by EMCRs, particularly women and people with caring responsibilities who have been identified as being at particular risk of experiencing significant and lasting negative impacts on their research careers [1-4]. Amidst this global crisis, EMCRs based in medical and health sciences from UoM and Monash collaborated to quantify the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on EMCRs as well as document trends in mental wellbeing, job security and culture. The survey team identified areas of concern, including low job insecurity, increased competition for funding, increased administrative burden, poor mental well-being, and concerning levels of exposure to inappropriate behaviour in the workplace.

While confronting, an open and ongoing discussion of the challenges facing EMCRs between EMCRs and the Faculty Executive enables us to work collaboratively and identify opportunities to address the challenges outlined in this document. Here we present the action items arising from the 2021 MDHS EMCR Town Hall in addition to questions and suggested solutions to increase the representation and support of EMCRs across MDHS. This report and updates on the key recommendation will be available via the MDHS ECR Network website: blogs.unimelb.edu.au/mdhsecrnetwork/.

Key Recommendations

The MDHS ECR Network and members of the Faculty Executive identified the following items for action. Progress on these action items will be provided at the next MDHS ECR Town Hall in October 2022.

- **MDHS ECR Network Town Hall.** The MDHS ECR Network will work with the MDHS Executive to plan and deliver an ECR-focused forum on an annual basis. The next forum is scheduled to occur in October 2022.

- **Workshop on the University financial model.** The MDHS ECR Network and the MDHS Executive identified a gap in EMCR knowledge regarding the financial model of the University. This knowledge would assist EMCRs to better understand the role of the University in managing funds, funds available for internal and teaching roles, and the on-cost procedure. It would also enable both parties to have more informed discussions regarding how best to support EMCRs within the confines of the University's financial system. The MDHS Executive has agreed to host a workshop on understanding the University's financial model and how finances are handled across the various levels of the University both from a research and administrative perspective. The MDHS ECR Network will help facilitate these workshops.

- **Improve communication strategies.** The MDHS ECR Network has committed to reviewing and improving the communication strategy to assure EMCRs are informed about current and future opportunities for funding, training and career progression. Specifically, the ECR Network aims to recruit a sub-committee lead dedicated to communications and have a dedicated subsection of the Associate Dean of Research's newsletter to showcase the activity of the Network as well as opportunities for EMCRs across the Faculty.

- **Advancement workshops.** Given the changing and challenging funding landscape, the MDHS ECR Network will work with the Faculty Executive to identify areas where EMCRs require additional support to seek and secure funds through industry and philanthropic sources. The MDHS ECR Network will liaise with the Associate Dean of Research to identify opportunities to upskill EMCRs in how to write funding applications for non-traditional (ie NHMRC, ARC) funding

sources. A particular focus will be on the development of philanthropic opportunities.

- **Continue to quantify EMCR wellbeing, culture, and job security.** In collaboration with the MDHS Executive, the ECR Network will continue to collect data assessing EMCR wellbeing, workplace culture and job security. This will provide longitudinal data to track changes in trends across time and identify ongoing and new concerns. These results will continue to be disseminated to the leadership teams across both the Faculty and the wider UoM academic community. The MDHS executive will use these findings to inform policy, workshops and other future initiatives in the faculty.

- **Document EMCRs with company Director or board experience.** The ECR Network will survey the wider MDHS EMCR community to document those with company director and/or board experience. These findings will then be passed along to Prof. Jane Gunn to note for future opportunities.

- **Continue with EMCR representation on committees.** Within MDHS, there has been a significant increase in the representation of EMCRs on grant review committees, hiring panels and other faculty-lead committees. The ECR Network will continue to monitor this representation and ensure EMCRs are included. The Network will also work to integrate the representative committee members with the Network itself so that we can better communicate the key activities of the committees with the wider EMCR community.

- **Track progress of new initiatives.** The MDHS Executive plan to introduce new initiatives in 2022, including KPIs for leaders to report problematic behaviour, more transparent and accessible hiring processes, benchmarks for contract length, ECR Leadership Skills workshop, and mentoring programs for unsuccessful, top ranked applicants for the Postdoctoral Fellowship. The ECR Network will track the progress of these programs as they are implemented and will provide feedback to the MDHS Executive on the implementation of these initiatives.

Progression from 2020 Town Hall

The ECR Network led Town Hall in 2020 produced several recommendations in collaboration with the MDHS Executive. Several new initiatives are outlined below that work to address these recommendations as well as address areas that need greater focus in the future.

What has been addressed in 2021

- Increased EMCR representation on hiring panels, grant review committees, and Faculty- and Chancellery-led committees

- Increased support for ECRs via the introduction of Momentum Fellowships

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- ECRs assisted in the drafting of the "Equity and Flexible Working Arrangements' proposal with the University

- Training resources soon to be available to train ECRs for Graduate Researcher supervision

What is still being addressed in 2022

- Increased transparency and communication between Faculty, MDHS ECR Network and broader EMCR community

- Preparation of resources for EMCRs, including accessible information on Level B and Level C promotion as well as how to effectively present career disruption information

- Development and implementation of Faculty Executive shadowing and mentoring programs

Following on from the Mental Wellbeing Survey

In 2020, the MDHS ECR Network administered a survey in collaboration with ECRs from Medicine and Health Sciences at Monash. The survey was designed to assess EMCR experiences across three core themes: workplace culture, career development and opportunities, and mental wellbeing. The survey revealed problematic findings regarding job security and workload. For example, 89.5% of EMCRs consistently worked overtime, 50.7% experienced considerable job insecurity, and 54.8% were experiencing moderate-to-severe burnout. The survey also found EMCRs were exposed to problematic behaviour in the workplace: 19.0% observed academic misconduct in the last three years, 49.8% experienced sexist hostility or unwanted sexual attention in the last 12 months and 22.5% experienced racism. This baseline of data has revealed the extent to which EMCRs experience these problems in the workplace, and both the Faculty and the MDHS ECR Network have agreed that annual surveys will enable improvements to be tracked over time. The full report on the Mental Wellbeing Survey can be accessed here.

In light of these findings, EMCRs were given the opportunity to ask questions to the MDHS Executive. Responses from the EMCR attendees focused on three main themes: Job security and grant acquisition, EMCR advocacy, and policing inappropriate behaviour.

Job security and grant acquisition

- UoM and Monash were successful in the last round of Ideas grants, suggesting grant bodies are accounting for the effects of persistent lockdowns.

- UoM submitted fewer grants in the last year, suggesting grant writing fatigue. The Faculty Executive highlighted the need to reinvigorate academics and help EMCRs focus their time on grant opportunities they are more likely to receive.

- Prof. Jane Gunn proposed long-term visions, such as five- or ten-year fellowships for EMCRs to increase job security but admits these steps will take time and significant advocacy.

- Analyses of previous Trust Fellows at UoM shows promising results, including moderate to high UoM retention rate and significant funding acquisition. This kind of data can be used to showcase the value of supporting ECRs and may lead to more opportunities in future.

- The UoM ECR grant scheme has a high success rate and the MDHS Executive encouraged ECRs to apply for these opportunities in future.

- Understanding the financial model of the University would assist in greater understanding of factors such as on-costs and the availability of internal teaching and research positions.

- Prof. Alicia Spittle encouraged EMCRs to engage in roles such as casual tutoring and guest lecturing to increase their chances of achieving teaching roles in the future.

- There are unacceptably high rates of EMCRs on 12 month or less fixed-term contracts, and the MDHS Executive is pushing the department and school leadership to change this culture. The MDHS Executive will set targets for leaders to achieve in 2022 to increase contract periods.

- The promotion process from level A to B lacked clarity and consistency across the faculty. This promoted a review of the process and the MDHS Executive has a number of recommendations for leaders of Departments and Schools to refine this process in 2022.

EMCR advocacy

- There is a lack of EMCR representation and transparency in discussions and advocacy that occur with grant bodies, although the MDHS Executive is committed to representing EMCR views in these conversations. There may be an open Melbourne-wide forum in the future with grant bodies to raise these concerns.

- There may be more effective ways for advocacy information to be relayed to the broader EMCR community.

- Prof. Erica Fletcher (Associate Dean of Graduate Research) and the Research Development Unit (RDU) are creating developmental training programs of ECRs hoping to engage in supervision, and this should be available in 2022.

- ECRs who receive fellowships may be given priority in receiving PhD scholarships for prospective students.

Policing Inappropriate Behaviour

- Prof. Mike McGuckin is developing a KPI system to police inappropriate behaviour and this will likely roll out in 2022.

- In the promotion or review process, a 360 review will be undertaken of the individual and will include feedback from supervisors, direct colleagues, and junior lab members to achieve a comprehensive view of the individual's performance and the workplace culture they are creating.

- The 'Embedding the Standards' program is currently being implemented for various MDHS leaders, exploring how to deal with poor behaviour, how to set expectations for positive behaviour and how to provide a safe reporting system for inappropriate behaviour.

- There is a need for a University-wide culture survey to assess and track behaviour across a broad range of groups. While the ECR Network-led survey is effective and should occur on a continuous basis, it only assesses one group, and these is hope to expand assessments to the entire academic community.

Commitments from the Executive

The Executive committed to working with the MDHS ECR Network to address the Key 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 ECRs across the Faculty.

References

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Appendix I

Questions submitted during the Forum

Responses	Upvotes	Downvotes
What pathways are there for ECRs to get on track for permanent Research- Teaching roles in the university? It feels near impossible, or just like it would be sheer luck, to make it that far.	11	0
What if any salary support schemes does MDHS offer for ECRs, beyond the "lottery" that is Melbourne Postdoctoral Fellowships? Salary support seems almost entirely sourced from external research funding (eg NHMRC or similar), which is becoming increasingly tenuous and difficult to rely on.	10	0
What are we doing to address Victoria-specific disruptions, and disproportionate effects to ECRs both geographically and career-stage wise. Other than buzzwords like relative to opportunity?..	8	0
I have recently been awarded a grant. I was surprised to learn that the University takes a massive cut of this (like 38%) for "on-costs". Surely this could be waived/reduced for ECRs who rely on every dollar to get their work done. Why is on-cost rate the same for ECRs and senior/rich researchers?	7	0
We heard a little last time about ECRs being prioritised or trained for phd/Grad supervision (or co-sup), this seems to be an advantageous step towards better development and also culture and even security and career..is this progressing?	5	0
How would a KPI for policing inappropriate behaviour work?	5	0
1 'recent strategy' from NHMRC touted to support ECRs is the IDEAS scheme, which has proved disastrous (success rates steered away from ECRs). What are we doing / can we do in the short term between 'old' CIs and instead of ECR CIs going into this scheme for security & proper acknowledgment?	5	0
A lot of concerns being raised highlight a lack of explanation/transparency of processes to ECRs. Some people have great supervisors/mentors that share this information, but not all. Would Jane/Mike/Alicia be willing to do a 'behind the research curtain' through the faculty lens?	4	0
The ECR grant doesn't cover salary, so is effectively not an option for those with insecure contract.	4	0
How can we best, as individuals or as a faculty, advocate for improved national funding for basic and translational research?	4	0

Could a program be developed to fund highly ranked NHMRC/ARC grants that just missed out? Perhaps in a co-funding model with Vic Gov?	3	0
Comment: without a secure contract, accessing promotion only make me less likely to get the next contract (too expensive) *** are more likely to recruit more PhD students instead. There's also far Too much incentive to take more PhD students	3	0
With finances we could also learn this in the leadership #development skills training course	1	0
Comment: this seems bleak for basic research..	1	0
Some people have been completely isolated during lockdown and the impact of this isolation is rarely discussed. What advice do you have for isolated individuals (even if they are a minority) about justifying how lockdown has impacted their career during the extended lockdown periods?	1	0
Philanthropy ???????? What about money from UoM itself. We cannot be at the mercy of	1	0
What incentives will be in place for department s to meet new ECR targets?	1	0
Will there be a follow up 'survey'? to measure whether we will improve or not? will the university-wide culture ones talked about just become tens of thousands of dollars given to another consultancy company?	0	0
Anonymous reviews don't always work because some people try to guess who gave them the review and retaliate inappropriately.	0	0