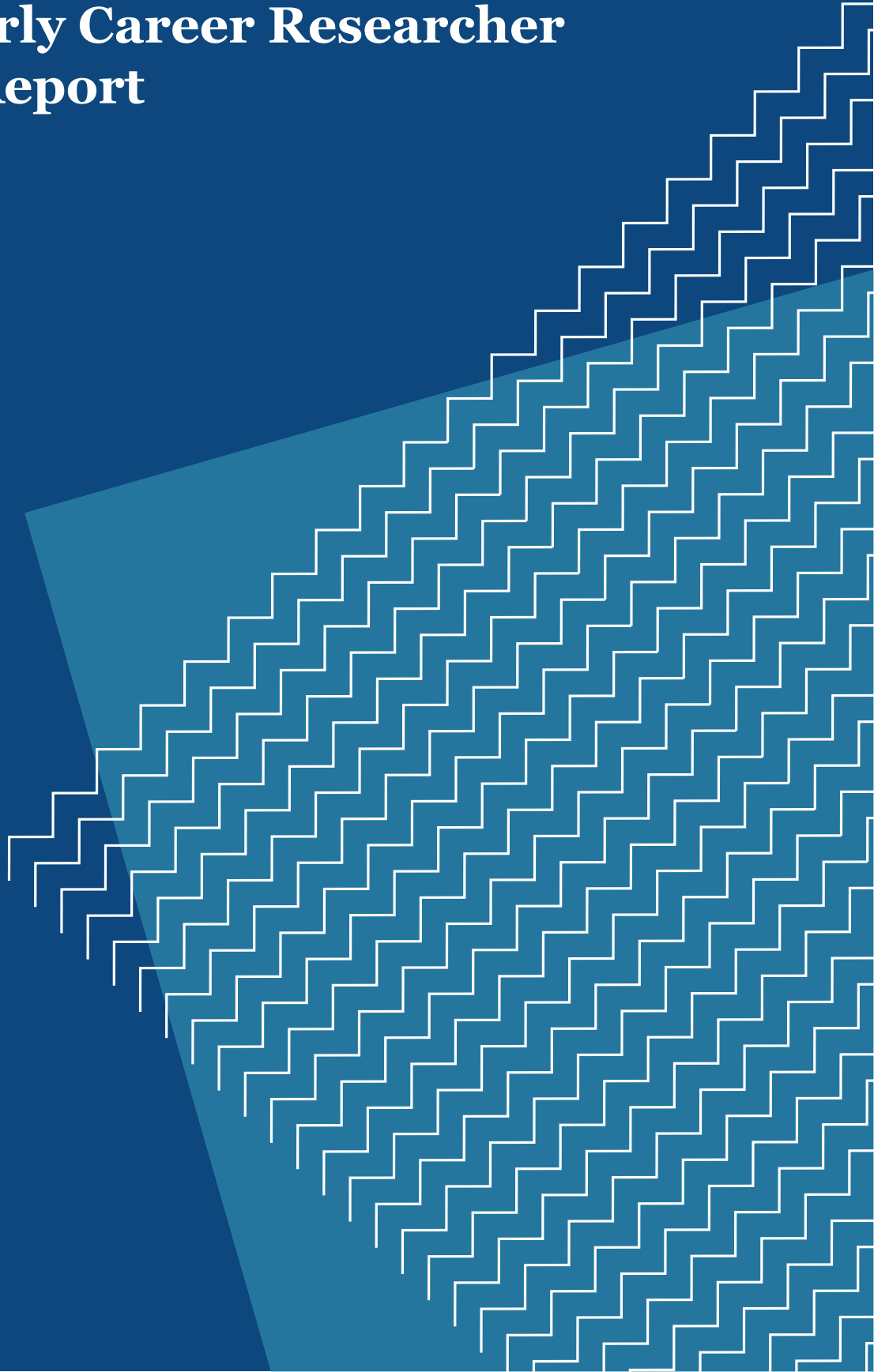




THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# MDHS Early Career Researcher Forum - Report

2 December 2020



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# MDHS ECR Forum Report - November 2020

## Introduction

On Friday 20 November 2020, 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 Shitij Kapur**, *Dean, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences and Assistant Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne*
- **Professor Jane Gunn**, *Deputy Dean, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences*
- **Professor Mike McGuckin**, *Associate Dean Research, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences*
- **Dr Claudia Marck**, *Senior Research Fellow, NHMRC Early Career Fellow, (Disability and Health Unit) Melbourne School of Population and Global Health.*

The MDHS ECR Forum provided Early and Mid-Career Researchers from across MDHS with an opportunity to share concerns and challenges with the Executive around 3 core themes: COVID-19 Disruptions, Security of Employment and Career Development. The forum featured representative case studies for each theme: Dr Hannah Morrice (COVID-19 Disruptions), Dr Susan Northfield (Security of Employment), and Dr Natalia Egorova (Career Development). It also provided an avenue for all parties to explore potential strategies and solutions aimed at overcoming these challenges and minimising the impact of COVID-19 on ECR careers.

## Background

*“Our early career researchers, along with our graduate research students, are the engine of our research activity and are vital to our future prosperity. Much has been written over the pandemic about the disproportionate influences on ECRs due to career stage, insecurity of funding and their time of life with young families/home schooling etc impacting on their work. I think this is well accepted: the challenge is what can we do to minimise the impact.” - Professor Mike McGuckin*

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken an unprecedented toll on the medical and biomedical research communities. Shutdowns across Australia, but particularly in Victoria, have resulted in the near-complete halt to basic and translational biomedical research. While the impact has been widespread across the research sector, ECRs, particularly women and people with caring responsibilities, have

been widely identified as being at particular risk of experiencing significant and lasting negative impacts on their research careers<sup>1-4</sup>. While the Forum focussed on the impact of COVID-19, it is important to note that many of the challenges currently facing ECRs (i.e. job insecurity, increased competition for funding, increased administrative burden, *etc.*) have been widely acknowledged over the past decade; the COVID-19 pandemic has merely acted to accelerate and exacerbate these long held concerns<sup>5</sup>.

The financial impact of the pandemic has been mixed, with the Faculty noting higher than average research income in 2020 on a backdrop of significant shortfalls in student income. In 2021, the Faculty must find savings of ~\$30 million from its operational budget, raising the question of how best to support staff and work towards the future while finding cutting significant costs?

While confronting, an open and ongoing discussion of the challenges facing ECRs between ECRs and the Faculty Executive enables us to work collaboratively and find opportunities to address the challenges outlined in this document. Here we present the action items arising from the 2020 MDHS ECR Forum in addition to questions and suggested solutions to increase the representation and support of ECRs across MDHS. This report and updates on the key recommendation will be available via the MDHS ECR Network website: [blogs.unimelb.edu.au/mdhsecrnetwork/](https://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 Forum in April 2021.

- **MDHS ECR Network Forums.** Professor Shitij Kapur proposed that ECR forums should be undertaken every 6 months to ensure open and ongoing communication across the Faculty. The MDHS ECR Network will work with the MDHS Executive to plan and deliver an ECR-focused forum on a 6-monthly basis. The next forum is scheduled to occur in April 2021.
- **Level B and C promotion.** The preparation of training and resources to facilitate promotion from Level A-B and Level B-C. This will include the development of a library of previously successful applications and clarification on how to broach the application process with supervisors and Heads of School / Department. The MDHS ECR Network will also engage with People and Culture team to deliver workshops aimed at clarifying the A-B promotion process.
- **Career disruption preparation.** The preparation of training and resources outlining how to effectively present career disruption information, including Victoria-based researcher disruptions due to COVID-19, in grant / promotion applications. This work will include the development of a library of career disruption sections from previously successful grant / promotions applications.

- **People management & supervision.** While the University currently offers compliance-based training it was acknowledged that additional training would better prepare ECRs for success and help to improve the culture across the Faculty. Further training in people management and supervision for ECRs and other academics to be investigated.
- **ECR representation across MDHS.** ECR representation on panels and committees (including promotions and hiring) across the Faculty will be assessed and a report produced in collaboration with Professor Jane Gunn. This information will also be added to the ECR Network website to ensure ECRs are aware of their representatives across the MDHS. This report will also enable us to identify panels/committees within the Faculty which do not currently have ECR representation.
- **Equity with flexible working arrangements.** The MDHS ECR Network will ensure discussion regarding ongoing flexible working arrangements include a focus on equity (e.g. ensuring equitable access to technology, space and resources required to undertake effective / productive work).
- **Advocacy with NHMRC / ARC.** The MDHS ECR Network will work with Professor Mike McGuckin and the MDHS Executive to examine opportunities for broader advocacy with major funding bodies regarding funding rollover and bridging funding to cover delayed funding opportunities.
- **Shadowing & mentoring programs.** Professor Jane Gunn noted that a shadowing & mentoring program between the Executive and ECRs would help bridge the knowledge gap between ECRs and the Faculty Executive. The MDHS ECR Network will work with Professor Gunn and the Executive to develop an Executive shadowing / mentoring program.
- **Teasing out contributions beyond the CIA.** Professor Mike McGuckin highlighted the importance of delineating the role of ECRs and other collaborators from beyond the CIA. The MDHS ECR Network will work with Professor McGuckin to explore options for a policy/white paper on changing the culture of academia towards a focus on increasing the recognition and importance of collaborative research programs.
- **Increasing transparency and communication.** The MDHS ECR Network will work with the Executive to provide easier access to resources and updates on the implementation of the strategies outlined here via the Network website. Resources will include links to upcoming ECR focussed funding opportunities (e.g. Momentum Fellowships - 2x2 year fellowships) and other support opportunities noted during the Forum. The Network will also increase its visibility across the Faculty to ensure that ECRs have a platform to discuss challenges and opportunities in an open and engaged manner. We will also work with the People and Culture team to investigate ways to improve the onboarding process for ECRs new to the Faculty.

## COVID-Related Disruptions

*“From an academic perspective, it’s difficult because I think we’re all really high achievers, as people who work in this space. So having the new work environment where your home and your (work) life is blended and those boundaries no longer exist, it meant that I didn’t have the capacity to do that extra surge or that extra ability to work a couple of extra hours at night... to get that paper finished or get that extra bit of research done.” - Dr Hannah Morrice on juggling working from home with a toddler*

While some academics have enjoyed the flexibility associated with working from home, many researchers, particularly women and people with caring responsibilities have noted significant career disruptions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Loss of access to facilities, loss of access to data and the inability to generate new data have resulted in a state of stasis for many ECRs. Working from home has further exacerbated a divide between those with the resources to succeed and those without the space or infrastructure within their homes to maintain productivity during this time. Questions raised during the forum, supported the comments made by Dr Morrice and focused on two main themes: Funding and support to address the inequitable impact of COVID-19.

### Funding

- What is the Faculty doing to support bridging funding given the delay in grant announcements coinciding with fixed term contract terminations?

### Addressing inequities

- What strategies / initiatives are being rolled out to address COVID-19 disruptions for ECRs and especially women?
- What strategies are in place to combat the impact of social isolation for ECRs living alone?

## Security of Employment

*“This week marks six years for me at the University of Melbourne. I joined as an early career researcher as a full-time post-doc and over the years I have been seeking my own funding to support my salary for every year except the first year. As a result, I have written 40-50 grant applications... and brought in almost \$1 million in funding, but it’s not enough... I’ve been here six years, I’ve been on 13 contracts.”  
- Dr Susan Northfield on the lack of job security for ECRs*

Despite changes to the Enterprise Agreement offering greater opportunities for longer-term and

continuing appointments, the majority of ECRs remain on fixed term 12-month contracts. A recent survey of ECRs in the School of Biomedical Sciences in MDHS revealed that 77% of the 52 respondents reported having fewer than 12 months remaining on their contracts and fewer than half of these researchers expected their contract to be renewed.

Responses from Forum attendees focused on two main themes: Training and increasing security.

### Training

- Given the high number of PhDs and ECRs who do not find work in academia, what is the Faculty doing to ensure ECRs and PhDs are prepared for life after academia (i.e. through professional development workshops / training)?

### Increasing security

- How can the Faculty support the move away from short-term contracts to longer term or even ongoing contracts for ECRs in line with grant funding?

## Career Development

*“In your career development you need to create a group, get grants... and find collaborators to increase your presence in the field. With building a group, supervision has been hard as projects have not been happening. With grants... there won't be any pilot data so this will impact me in this year's funding round, but also next year's funding round. These three pillars of career development have been under attack with COVID.” - Dr Natalia Egorova on career “survival” / development*

Conversations regarding career development highlighted the disparate experiences across the ECR cohort. While some ECRs have seen a surge in productivity, many others have struggled to maintain productive workloads due to the inability to generate data, the increased administrative / teaching burden of their roles, and/or the lack of resources, infrastructure and/or time to effectively work in their home environment.

For career development, responses from Forum attendees focused on three main themes: Support, advocacy, and promotion.

### Support

- Many ECRs noted feeling overwhelmed by the increasing requirements of their academic and teaching workloads. They asked for support to lessen the administrative burden of their roles and advice on how to continue developing as academics despite their limited time.
- Respondents noted international ECRs and Students were particularly impacted by the pandemic

and asked what supports were in place to ensure their ongoing career progression?

- More specific feedback for internal funding applications for EMCRs was requested to ensure that the opportunity to improve grant writing / science communication is utilised.
- It was noted that the support / advice offered by senior academics often failed to consider the different research / funding landscape faced by current ECRs.
- Programs aimed at helping ECRs build resilience, elevate leadership skills, create effective teams, and identify local collaborators to increase individual and local capacity were requested.

### Advocacy

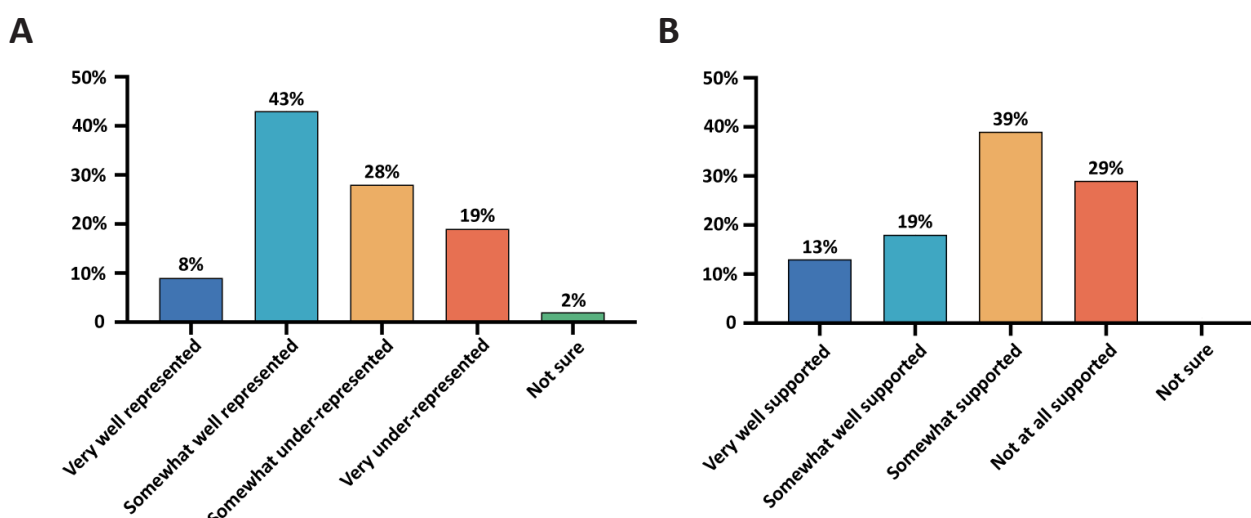
- ECRs asked for the Faculty / University to advocate for more equitable funding conditions from the NHMRC / ARC. This includes the roll-over of funding due to the pro-longed career disruption due to COVID.

### Promotion

- ECRs noted that the promotion process from Level A to Level B required clarification and that resources and training in promotion through to Level C would be beneficial.
- How will the Faculty ensure that promotion panels assess career disruptions arising from COVID-19 in an equitable manner?

## Representation and Support

During the Forum, ECRs were surveyed about how represented and supported they felt within the Faculty. 52% felt at least somewhat represented across MDHS; however, almost a third did not feel at all supported by the Faculty (*Figure 1*).



*Figure 1. ECR attendees at the forum noted that (A) while most felt represented across the Faculty, (B) there were opportunities to increase support across the Faculty (47 & 38 respondents, respectively).*

In addition to noting room for improvement, the Forum also provided an opportunity for ECRs to outline potential solutions and strategies to increase ECR representation and support across MDHS. The key strategies outlined during the Forum are provided below (see **Appendix I** for a full list of questions and responses arising during the Forum):

### Representation

- Seed funding to encourage collaboration across Early and Mid-Career Researcher groups in MDHS
- ECR representation on all committees/ panels (including hiring and promotion) across the Faculty
- Expansion of the MDHS leadership program
- Formal orientation/on-boarding programs to introduce ECRs to the resources and opportunities that exist across MDHS
- Increased transparency of communication to ECRs across MDHS
- More open advocacy for ECR issues to government funding bodies

### Support

- Increased job security (e.g. through longer contracts)
- Promotion of spread of positive culture across the Faculty. This includes support to improve culture in teams/areas where problematic practises have been identified in addition to support for staff working in these teams/environments.
- Increased transparency regarding career development (e.g. how to navigate promotion)
- Training in people management / mentoring / supervision beyond compliance
- Increased opportunities for collaboration across the across the University
- Development of consistent practices across Departments/Schools for communication, promotion, and program development
- Dedicated funding to initiate new EMCR-led interdisciplinary collaborations

## Commitments from the Executive

*“I hope you hold onto that passion and... that ambition. And you’ve certainly demonstrated resilience. And frankly, that’s all you need in the world. You’ve got those three things now it’s a matter of time.” - Professor Shitij Kapur*

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

## *Pre-submitted questions during registration*

N.b. Consider a longer text box limit for future Forums.

- Given that fellowship support is getting harder to get, what are the Faculty's plans in this area?
- As projects have slowed considerably this year, how will academic promotion panels and grant panels assess this disruption?
- What strategies / initiatives are being rolled out to address these three areas for ECRs and especially women?
- How can we avoid living grant-to-grant forever?
- I'm barely staying afloat with my current teaching/academic commitments - how can I progress my research career with no time?
- I'm a recently employed ECR. What 2-3 things should I be doing now for me to start building my career development?
- What are some of the measures, if any that MDHS is taking to ensure career progression amongst ECRs, especially recent graduates
- Considering the Covid impact on government funding, what are the initiatives University is taking to support Mid career woman re
- How is career progression going to be supported within a context of limited external funding for research outside of medicine?
- How will the Faculty handle the delay in grant announcements coinciding with fixed term contract terminations?
- How is the university looking to engage and mentor academic clinicians?
- What is the university's advice (and what resources are available) to build a career development plan?
- Offer more professional development workshops for ECRs + Get PostAc subscription
- 3. Plan for promotions from A to B and B to C for research fellows in 2021
- There are some PhD students who are asked to finish by Masters instead of PhD. What do you suggest for those students?
- security of employment
- Is the University planning to provide bridging grants for people waiting for Covid-19 delayed grant outcomes (some Feb 2021)?

## Questions submitted during the Forum

Responses	Upvotes	Downvotes
#COVID How do we ensure departments and supervisors understand their responsibilities of support - especially in environments with more 'toxic' cultures	9	0
#security Every week I have a conversation with my supervisor which goes along the lines of, there's no money, there's no funding, we need to find some way of covering your salary. It's disheartening and demoralising.	6	0
Could Mike speak to current discussions/advocacy on ECR behalf with NHMRC regarding timelines for grant deadlines eg no date yet for investigator grants in 2021, ideas grants announcements under embargo likely in mid to late december which affects contract extensions & delayed rounds in 2020 eg CTCS	5	0
#development yes, expectations around Level A and B need to be challenged. We are expected to cover our salaries at Level B... how is that possible when many of us aren't eligible to be CI.As or even eligible for ARCs given our 'poor' track record	3	0
Really like Mike saying tease out individual contributions beyond CIA. Be great to see a policy/white paper put forward where the university discusses how they can address this at least internally for now #Please #Please #Please	3	0
#security There are dodgy practices all over the place. ECRs not being built into grant applications because those grants don't cover salaries leading to a never-ending cycle of ECRs being stuck at the RA level and not being able to demonstrate progression	3	0
#development Thank you Hannah for giving voice to what so many of us have been experiencing. Understandably these are not issues that can be resolved by UoM alone, but it does requires more than just platitudes and references to the fact that this is a perennial issue for women/mothers.	3	0
Too may academic mothers (and to a lesser extend fathers) are writing grants during maternity leave (and/or while working from home with kids). The reality of support structures from the university are appalling #development	3	0
#security #development RE Research Strategy, how will you ensure that researchers who are expected to engage in teaching are not overloaded, to ensure continued research of quality. That is, how will we actually ensure ECRs are not exploited.	3	0
#development, #security One problem for EMCRs is that you need to bring in salary AND build a track record. When NHMRC and ARC won't let you be in investigator on a grant and receive salary from it, this is particularly difficult. Could the University be advocating for this to change?	2	0
#development #covid What are the programs in placed that aim to better support international researchers, international researchers suffered more during COVID because they can't access government supports.	1	0
#COVID Work from home with children = difficult but what about the indiv who has become completely isolated over this time? The impact this has on someone can be extreme but less relatable and difficult to understand. Extreme isolation can impact productivity – how do you assist these people?	1	0
Some universities provide #PhD scholarship in return for securing nhmrc CTCS or equivalent large project grants. Would UniMelb consider committing to this or equivalent amount towards postdoc funding. #RewardsForFunding This would help with increasing contract duration	1	0

Responses	Upvotes	Downvotes
Other Go8 Universities (and Institutes) provide financial top-ups (PhD stipends) and on-costs support. The baby boomer generation benefitted from holding multiple grant	1	0
Brava, Susan, brava. The Uni and its higher leadership profit handsomely from our research and teaching labour but it's obviously structured to shed a big fraction of us every year, and at the moment it doesn't do anything to help us make that transition. #security	1	0
#development #solutions - need programs focused on building resilience, elevating leadership skills, creating effective teams PLUS opportunities to identify local collaborators to make projects happen more efficiently and build local capacity #UniMelb #GoToPlace	1	0
The research strategic plan of the Faculty accentuates supporting "quality" not "quantity" (ie fellowship track). That ambiguous terminology adds anxiety. What message are you sending to EMCRA's especially part-time workers and/or those with family/disability constraints #development #security	0	0
#development Could eligibility for internal seed funding be oriented to support collaboration within EMCR community? I am not eligible for inclusion in ECR seed funding, my ECR collaborator is not eligible for inclusion in MCR seed funding! Frustrating...	0	0
#development Is it possible to improve feedback processes for internal funding applications for EMCRA's? Important development opportunity is missed by not providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants.	0	0
#development Is it possible to improve feedback processes for internal funding applications for EMCRA's? Important development opportunity is missed by not providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants.	0	0
#development Is it possible to improve feedback processes for internal funding applications for EMCRA's? Important development opportunity is missed by not providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants.	0	0

*Forum Responses: What could be done to help ECRs/MCRs feel more represented within their Schools/Departments and on a Faculty level? Response (votes)*

- More opportunities - small seeding grants (26)
- Hard commitments from Faculty to improve some of these issues we have discussed today (17)
- Ensuring a place for ECRs (multiple if possible) at all levels of committees (10)
- Continue the MDHS leadership program - and expand it. It's brilliant! (9)
- Involvement in committees - not easy to get in !! (8)
- Seed funding to encourage collaboration within EMCR community - MCRs cannot apply to seed funding with an ECR collaborator and vice versa (7)
- A formal orientation program to introduce ECRs to the organization and its resources (look to the corporate world) (7)
- ECRs sitting on exec or hiring panels on a School and Department level (7)
- Ensure communication to all of the EMCR groups in MDHS, and not just the ECR network (though they are brilliant!). (7)
- Identify the ECR representatives in each school (6)
- A better onboarding process for new ECRs. The Uni is a hard place to navigate (5)
- More open advocacy for ECR issues to ARC/NHMRC (5)
- MDHS ECR Network needs to organise more social opportunities to help us feel less isolated. (7, 2) (up-vote, downvote)
- Make sure standard practice for EMCRs who start at the university is to be told about ALL the EMCR forums in the faculty (4)
- Offer large-scale training program for EMCRs to upskill during their time at UoM to transition to a non-academic career (ie professional development) (4)
- Formal departmental training programs (4)
- maybe develop broad research areas across schools and faculties to promote idea generation (4)
- More forums for direct interaction with dept/school head (4)
- transparent calls for people to join committees/get roles etc are needed. i have great uni mentor who puts me forward for lots but not everyone has this opportunity. #leveltheplayingfield (3)
- Require Department faculty meetings to include EMCR representatives (3)
- Increase opportunities for cross discipline meet ups (3)
- Greater recognition of the diversity of skills and experiences that ECRs bring (e.g., clinical experience, prior work) and how these are be used as strengths in a research career (2)
- more meetings involving supervisor and ECR explaining the opportunities to both (2)

- MCR - in the clinical schools focus is on Clinician researcher not the scientists.
- one thing about seed funding mechanisms is they tend to be structured as competitive, and the indicators used are the usual match-to-strategy, outputs, so they concentrate limited resources in the hands of people who are relatively secure already. could we lottery or something fairer instead? (1)
- EMCRA started a great mentoring program this year for EMCRs in School of Biomedical Sciences. Chat to their cochairs about it. (1)
- At my old institution ECRs were invited to speak at staff inductions to make ECRs aware of what support and schemes were on offer and tips and tricks for getting started (1)
- Encourage supervisors to be more engaged within the faculty. (1)
- SHS ECR Network is currently “under development” but there is no information about this or how to be involved at the early stages. (1)
- voice and decision power
- A place we can go to find ‘innovative’ solutions that others have used to overcome organisational barriers (0)
- I didn’t even know the MDHS ECR Network existed and I’ve been here for 2 years. There needs to be much broader dissemination of the Network and it needs to have a much broader focus. Not all of us in MDHS are in medicine (0)
- Head of School Level A/B zoom lunch was nice but hasn’t happened again since (0)

## *Forum Responses: What could be done to support ECRs/MCRs at the Department/School/ Faculty level? Response (votes)*

- Longer contracts (14)
- This is not a solution, just an observation but some people should not be supervisors. There are some great senior academics that are extremely supportive. But there are many that are toxic. (12)
- identify departments with toxic culture of lack of support and ensure they understand their responsibilities to EMCRs - some see us as hands in the lab who don't need to know what's going on at the higher levels of the department/school (11)
- Rewarding loyalty to the University (10)
- More bridging fellowships (DKCF can and should not replace this scheme) (7)
- Knowing how to navigate promotion (especially from A to B) (7)
- I have #phenomenal faculty allocated mentors who sponsor me, take calls at random hours, review grants (multiple times even when not named!), regular touch points etc. Consider offering training to help build these skills across the faculty :) (6)
- More clarity and support to engage students for supervision experience (5)
- I find more support is given to clinician researchers and not to the scientists. More likely to be supported in promotions and included in grants due to MRFF. Opportunities seem to be diminishing for the scientists working in the clinical school departments. (3)
- I was successful in my promotion to C and I could not possibly have done it without example applications, which I found myself. I have shared my application but it's all been private. (3)
- Encourage supervisors to ensure that before the contract ends that the staff has acquired enough career development opportunity during their employment. I hate the feeling of being used, you worked hard and then the supervisors just say that you better find another opportunity somewhere soon. (3)
- Opportunities across the University (not just within MDHS) to collaborate and build novel cross-disciplinary links (e.g. engineering, IT...) (3)
- Having a clear and transparent pathway and commitment to support EMCRs with at least two previous NHMRC/ARC fellowships (3)
- re Mike's comment - there does seem to be inconsistency between departments about what constitutes a case for promotion for either A-B or B-C. (2)
- A portion of all grants go into a Bridging support program to help cover gaps in funding (2)
- re level A to B promotion "it depends on your supervisor and HoD". When I bring this up with my supervisor, they don't seem to know whether this is a possibility, so perhaps supervisors need to also be better informed on how this process works. (2)

- Representation at high levels/committees helps - so we are asked questions (2)
- #Solution What about if the uni went half's in the a to b transition with supervisors (1)
- Formal orientation would be great. There is a lot of information available but knowing how to find it can be challenging, especially when more senior academics either don't know or don't have the time to assist (1)
- Sandpit events to encourage cross-faculty collabs! E.g. digital health (1)
- Dedicated funding to initiate new EMCR-led interdisciplinary collaborations e.g. travel, organising a meeting, salary funding for a collaborative scoping review and so on (1)
- Honoring commitments to bridging support in earlier contracts (1)
- The MDHS is a very diverse faculty. It would be really good to have some broader representation of all the different schools and departments. (0)
- "Supervising Doctoral Studies? Epigeum
- <https://www.epigeum.com/courses/research/supervising-doctoral-studies/>" (0)
- I hear you about the dearth of money, but still. Salary money. (0)
- More Level A/B zoom lunch with heads to keep finger on the pulse (0)
- Engagement (0)

Report prepared by Drs Andrew Watt, Fern Koay, Makhala Khammy and Trevor Steward on behalf of the MDHS ECR Network.

For more information visit: [blogs.unimelb.edu.au/mdhsecrnetwork/](https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/mdhsecrnetwork/)