

MDHS Early Career Academics

2023 MDHS ECA Town Hall Summary



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Introduction

As a regular feature of the University of Melbourne Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) Early Career Academic (ECA) Network's calendar, the annual MDHS ECA Town Hall allows for an open dialogue between Faculty leadership and early career academics. Since the inaugural Town Hall in 2020, these discussions have included a focus on changes in the academic landscape as well as the regular challenges faced by early career academics, such as job insecurity, career disruptions, and limited funding opportunities. The MDHS ECA Town Hall provides an opportunity for ECAs across the Faculty to discuss collaborative solutions to these challenges and identify key actions that Faculty leadership and the ECA Network can take to improve the prospects of MDHS ECAs.

In 2023, the Town Hall program centred on three themes:

1. Job security
2. Funding
3. ECA representation and advocacy

These themes were identified by ECAs across the Faculty as high priority challenges. The program began with presentations from the Faculty Executive Leadership team detailing current and past actions aimed to address these issues. A dedicated question-and-answer session followed, including pre-selected questions from our survey of ECAs, 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 to ask the Executive panel anonymously (see Appendix I for list of all submitted questions).

The meeting was held on Wednesday, 9th of August 2023, at Graduate House and online, and was chaired by Dr Jenn Lacy-Nichols (Research Fellow, Centre for Health Policy).

Panelists featured from the Executive Leadership team of the Faculty of MDHS, were:

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

Professor Jane Gunn (Dean, MDHS) was not able to attend as a panelist as planned, however she responded to four key questions which the ECA group put to her after the Townhall (Appendix II).

The ECA group also extended an invitation to other Faculty and School leaders from across MDHS.

Summary report purpose

Here, we outline the actionable items identified at the 2023 MDHS ECA Town Hall. These actions include new approaches and initiatives as well as building on areas highlighted in previous years. We also reflect on items from previous annual town halls and the progress made towards these.

Context

In the aftermath of the 2020-2021 public health restrictions aimed at reducing COVID-19 transmission, the University of Melbourne (and other institutions globally) have entered a 'post-pandemic' work phase. Typically this includes a greater emphasis on flexible working arrangements, which some ECAs have benefitted from [1]. There remains an important opportunity to reflect on how institutions, including the University of Melbourne, can build back better, or rather, 'build back fairer' [2]. The COVID pandemic exposed many unethical ways in which universities operate, including with a heavily casualised and precarious professional and academic workforce. The negative impacts this casualisation has on ECAs' job security, opportunities for career advancement, university culture and individual mental health and wellbeing are increasingly recognised [3, 4].

In addition, casual University of Melbourne staff, including casual ECAs, have been especially affected by underpayment, with back payments continuing into 2023. As of 20 April 2023, the University of Melbourne has processed approximately \$45 million in back payments (including superannuation and interest) to staff [5]. Although in part a reflection of the limited national research funding, we believe there are local opportunities to better manage the early career research environment and career trajectory at the University of Melbourne.

Actionable items and recommendations

- 1. Allow ECAs to present regularly at Faculty Executive meetings:** Faculty Executive to consider the addition of a dedicated ECA position on the Executive committee to amplify the voice of ECAs' within the Faculty and provide additional opportunities for them to advocate for ECA-specific issues.
- 2. Develop a dashboard of metrics to track specific targets relating to ECAs' career success:** Proposed by Prof Mike McGuckin as a way to track target metrics for ECA success across MDHS. For example, displaying the number of ECAs who received a promotion through different academic levels, and the proportion of staff on fixed-term versus continuing contracts. The dashboard would also help to highlight key progress made by the Faculty on the items noted throughout this report and assist in identifying further key opportunities for improvement.
- 3. Continue to nurture open communication pathways between ECAs**

and Executive with a commitment to supporting ECAs' career progression, job security and wellbeing. It is noted that there are currently no systematic processes in place to help PhD students and new ECAs understand how to thrive in academia - or in other sectors. This is an area which would be straightforward to address (e.g. through online learning modules, and/or education sessions).

- 4. Maintain and expand opportunities for ECAs to receive funding for projects they lead.** 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 hampers their career progression.
- 5. 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. It is noted that the University is currently in discussions with the NTEU regarding this and other issues.
- 6. 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.

Thematic synopsis

Questions raised by ECAs focused on four themes: Job security, Funding, Representation and advocacy, and Academic promotions.

JOB SECURITY

Job security for ECAs is limited by the availability of research funding. This is a sector-wide problem. Government is changing policy around hiring fixed-term staff and University of Melbourne is currently in negotiation with the National Tertiary Education Union – while this is likely to result in changes to employment contracts, it is unclear how this will affect ECA's job security (or lack thereof), if at all.

University of Melbourne Executive supports introducing a principle to standardise hiring staff for the life of a project where funding for those staff has been awarded, rather than keeping staff on renewable 12-month contracts.

After someone has worked continuously for University of Melbourne for 5 years, they should be eligible for on-going employment (although possibly only when research-dependent funding is available).

- The University of Melbourne People and Culture system should be triggered when the staff member becomes eligible, with on-boarding initiated by People and Culture.
- If onboarding does not occur, ECAs should talk to their supervisors about ongoing work.

Note: ECAs have raised concerns regarding the following: eligibility loopholes for transitioning to a continuing position, whether People and Culture will actually instigate this process, and whether supervisors can/will support it.

FUNDING

ECAs appreciate the MDHS grant opportunities which are open to them, such as near-miss fellowships.

MDHS Executive suggest that on-costs are generally not well understood by researchers and have highlighted that more education is required. The Methods and Implementation Support for Clinical and Health Research Hub (MISCH) can provide support for budgeting.

ECAs are concerned about the strict eligibility criteria and accepted expenditure restrictions that are imposed on grant opportunities, and comment on how this limits their ability to apply for grants. In particular, their eligibility is impaired by fixed-term contract expiry dates. MDHS Executive encourages possible applicants to discuss eligibility with their Head of Department.

- The Executive's response to this concern is that researchers are encouraged to only apply for grants they will actually be able to use after on-costs, and only apply if they have a suitable employment contract for the time required to conduct the research.

REPRESENTATION AND ADVOCACY

ECAs are asked to identify key zones to the Executive which they would like to increase their representation in and let them know. ECAs are invited to present their recommendations following this Townhall at the next Executive meeting.

ACADEMIC PROMOTIONS

Executive states that the responsibility of the ECA's Supervisor to support ECA promotion. This responsibility is built into the Supervisor's role.

Executive encourages ECAs to refer to their guidance documents when applying for promotion, especially when writing the Relative to Opportunity section as this component is not always well understood.

Progress from the previous town hall

The 2022 Town Hall report proposed seven actionable items and

recommendations. Below, we present on progress and opportunities for further actions.

- 1. Cosponsor and expand ECA and Research Fellowships:** New offerings are the Career Continuity Grants (\$400,000). In total, MDHS budget for grants and fellowships in the A-C levels are estimated at \$5,330,000. Also noted that there is the potential to negotiate for increased number of Melbourne Postdoctoral Fellowships for MDHS. The Melbourne Investigators Support Program was started in 2022 to support NHMC Investigator grant applications. It is noted that 2023 saw larger numbers of EL1 applications than in previous years.

We appreciate the new offering and wonder whether there is capacity to support additional near miss grants.

- 2. Make continuing contracts commonplace:** Some progress noted, with approximately 27% reduction in the number of people on fixed term contracts. However, the number of people with less than 12 months remaining on their contract ranges from 20-70% depending on department. At chancellery, the People at Work committee is developing new principles for employing people within the University. One example is making it standard for people to be employed for the entire length of a grant. It was also noted that the transition from fixed term to continuing contract is automatically triggered by People and Culture once people have worked for five years regardless of whether their salary is externally funded or provided through operating funds.

Noting the ongoing negotiations with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), we look forward to developments in the coming months.

- 3. Standardise career progression activities as part of performance development reviews:** In the last year, 80% of academic staff had a performance development review (PDR), which is an improvement, but is still below the target of greater than 90%. MDHS also has revised academic performance guidelines, particularly for academic specialists or teaching specialists, with more details about expectations for promotion. MDHS will also audit the quality of PDRs and conduct focus groups about PDR experiences (including by holding a session targeting ECAs). Also, for the first-time last year all promotions from Level A to B were reviewed by a faculty panel; an approach which is felt to address inconsistencies between departments.

We look forward to the new performance guidelines and welcome the opportunity to provide input into the review of PDRs and the capacity of supervisors to hold good quality carer discussions.

- 4. ECA committee representation:** There is very positive feedback about the contribution of ECAs on committees across the Faculty. MDHS has also sought to invite ECA representative to other forums, e.g. Faculty Conference,

appointment committees. The Faculty Executive committee was noted as one of the few committees without ECA representation. This was flagged as a time-intensive commitment, but something the Faculty was open to.

We appreciate the offer for a position on the Executive committee and are discussing the logistics within the ECAN committee. We hope to nominate a representative in 2024.

5. Include ECAs in advocacy efforts to increase research funding: It was observed that ‘proper funding of research’ is an expensive issue to solve, and limited attention is given to addressing the issue this reason in the University Accord released in 2023. The engagement of ECAN with Research Australia was flagged as a key advocacy opportunity.

6. Provide regular progress reports: This was noted as the item with the least progress made. Two suggestions were to: 1) Arrange for Faculty Executive to catch up with the ECAN group more regularly, and 2) Develop a metrics dashboard to show metrics about contract type and length.

We strongly advocate for the creation of the dashboard to aid in career development and promotion conversations as well as publicise faculty progress on improving job security metrics.

7. Continued funding for professional development: **Not discussed at the 2023 Townhall, ECAs are unsure sure if MDHS initiatives cover ECAs’ professional development, or in what capacity.

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. 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. University of Melbourne. *Flexible Working*. 2023 [cited 2023 9 May]; Available from: <https://mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/beyond2018/people-and-culture/mdhs-careers-melbourne/support-and-development-hub/flexible-working#overview>.
2. Marmot M, et al., *Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review. The Pandemic, Socioeconomic and Health Inequalities in England*. 2020, Institute of Health Equity: London.
3. Schneiders B, *A high-status 'gig economy': How we have failed our researchers*, in *Sydney Morning Herald*. 2022: Sydney, Australia.
4. Jones N, *Early-career researchers in Australia are miserable at work*, in *Nature*. 2023: United States.
5. University of Melbourne. *Wage Remediation Program*. 2023 [cited 2023 9 May]; Available from: <https://www.unimelb.edu.au/wage-remediation-program#:~:text=As%20of%2020%20April%202023,2013%20and%202018%20enterprise%20agreements>.

Appendices

APPENDIX I

Online questions submitted during the meeting

1. Is there a formal plan in place to offer more continuing / tenured positions for ECAs? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
2. How are we responding to The University of Sydney Horizon Fellowships - 40 continuing positions that each start with a five-year research-focused fellowship?
3. What process do you have in place for people to discuss supervisory issues and complaints, where they feel their anonymity and position may be protected?
4. While it is great to have ECR grants to build track record, we can't pay ourselves from these grants. Similar if we happen to win an ARC. How can we support ECAs to cover their salary?
5. Is there a plan to offer fellowships to Mid-Career level B academics? Most fellowships are limited to 3-5y post-PhD and then Kate Campbell eligibility is at Level C, leaving a lot of level B academics beyond 5y post PhD with very limited fellowship options.
6. At least one of the Uni funded fellowships are funded at a max of level A.8 - given how many ECAs are likely at level B above already, why is this so? It means it's actually not a 1 year fellowship - it's much less. It cuts a huge amount of time out for the work you want to do.
7. ECAs are central to the work done on nearly all NHMRC / ARC grants. Why are there no performance metrics for senior researchers/ lead heads around the inclusion of ECAs on these grants or the promotion of ECAs under their supervision across levels (ie A to B, B to C)?
8. What are the current statistics regarding the proportions of people on short-term vs continuing contracts across the Faculty? Please include a split between funding contingent and non-contingent continuing positions.
9. I have made the 5 year transition to continuing recently. It was not initiated by HR, so ECAs should be advised to chase this up with HR
10. What measures are being considered to increase eligibility for UoM ECR grants? Many ECRs are not eligible for not having secure contracts, which contributes to amplifying inequities.
11. What is the Faculty doing to support ECAs who also have caring responsibilities? For example, parents, so they don't lose their momentum.
12. The question about covering the grant holder's salary wasn't covered in the response, can you please ask that again?
13. Just wanted to hear thoughts on ECAs who were stuck in the A.8 bottleneck for years because of misinformation around criteria/no supervisor support for promotion. Years of salary/super missed whilst stuck at the top of level

- A, but actually should have been promoted based on the new process.
14. I know this is not popular as it is not relevant to most people but considering this is the Early Career Academic Network, I was wondering if there is a division for Academics that are teaching only?
 15. Could the faculty do more to advocate for processes/operations that have become inefficient due to centralisation (leading to "service creep" for ECAs) to be reclaimed back to departments (e.g., ethics approval, IT procurement, academic advising etc)
 16. Given the dire funding opportunities for ECRs, what can the faculty do to help ECR transition successfully to careers outside academia?
 17. Dept Microbiology and Immunology ran a successful Academic Career Strategy Panel this year, could something similar be considered at faculty level for those planning on applying for promotion in the following year? This could leverage feedback from previous members of promotion committees.
 18. Can we also do more to get senior staff to add ECAs on their grant applications, to help them build track record
 19. What is the process for moving to a continuing contract? I'm hearing of staff who have been on a fixed term contract for more than five years and have had issues moving to a continuing research contingent contract.

APPENDIX II

Questions posed to and responses from Prof Jane Gunn (Dean, MDHS).
MDHS Dean.

Jane, we know that you were unfortunately called away from our Townhall. Your EA indicated that you may have capacity to respond to a few of the questions raised during the meeting. Would you be able to offer your perspective on the following four questions? (Mike and Alicia, please feel free to contribute).

1. *How is the faculty recognising supportive and proactive supervisors? E.g., the inclusion of ECAs on grants or the promotion of ECAs?*

Our MDHS Faculty Awards open on 2 October. We have several awards for mentoring more junior academics at the faculty level and most schools also have these awards.

We consider an academic's record of support of ECAs in their argued case for promotion, and this is considered extremely important for promotion to Level E. The panel takes into account how senior staff have supported growth and development of ECAs over their career and the ongoing success/career path of the mentored academics is an important consideration.

Most grants at a national level encourage inclusion ECAs as investigators. At the faculty level, most of our internal grants are actually targeted to EMCAs directly, rather than senior staff with the exception of the Dame Kate Campbell Fellowships.

Our Dame Kate Campbell Fellows are asked questions on leadership/ support of ECAs as part of their interview process and this forms an important element of the scoring template.

We are of course open to further suggestions from ECAN on how we encourage supervisor support.

2. *What process do you have in place for people to discuss supervisory issues and complaints, where they feel their anonymity and position may be protected (esp where supervisors may be in positions of leadership)?*

There are many levels that this can be dealt with. Where possible it is good for the person to speak directly to their supervisor's supervisor or the relevant Head of Department/School. Alternatively, the local People and Culture business partner is always available and provides a safe source of advice independent of the academic hierarchy. We also have an open-door policy and any member of our Deanery is available for ECAs to reach out to depending on seriousness of the concern, including Deputy Dean Mike McGuckin,

Associate Dean Research Alicia Spittle, Associate Dean Teaching and Learning Liz Molloy and Associate Dean Diversity and Inclusion Natalie Hannan. Prof Alicia Spittle has recently launched a "catch up with the Associate Dean Research" where she has a 30min time slot for a coffee or walk with an ECA to have a one-on-one discussion. This is to encourage more open conversations and accessibility to leadership. However, if it is a more urgent issue a more urgent time can be made.

You may also wish to take a look at the [Appropriate Workplace Behaviour Policy \(MPF1328\)](#)

3. *What is the faculty's/University's appetite for developing something akin to the University of Sydney Horizon Fellowships - 40 continuing positions that each start with a five-year research-focused fellowship?*

The University already has several post-doctoral position including approx 10 Melbourne Post-doctoral Fellowships and 10 McKenzie Fellowships which are available every year, and are supporting 90 individuals with additional security of employment via Dame Kate Campbell Fellowships. In addition, at the faculty level we have several trust fellowships and 2-3 Indigenous post-doctoral fellowships per year. At this stage the university is not considering a scheme like the University of Sydney, although University of Melbourne created 50 new positions via the Driving Research Momentum scheme which operated from 2017-2020.

4. *At the 2022 townhall, there was a large focus on data, and its value in assessing career trajectories and progress. Would we be able to get data for the below metrics?*

Counts for PhDs and levels A, B, C, D, E (with breakdowns for the following: gender; contract category – casual, fixed term, continuing research contingent, continuing; time remaining on contract).

Mike discussed having a dashboard with relevant data for ECA's that can be shared quarterly with the network. I suggest we discuss what data would be most useful for the dashboard at the presentation to Faculty Executive.

