Upcoming training, grants, and prizes for ECRs at MQ

EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER NEWS
December 2020

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Our recent award winners

Our ECR Showcase Winners

- Faculty of Arts Winner: **Dr Emma Burns** (School of Education)
- Macquarie Business School Winner: **Dr Colin Zhang** (Department of Actuarial Studies and Business Analytics)
- Faculty of Medicine, Health and Human Sciences Winner: **Dr Kathleen Yin** (Australian Institute of Health Innovation)
- Faculty of Science and Overall Winner: **Dr Noushin Nasiri** (School of Engineering)

Also congratulations to all the presenters as well as the ECR Showcase Committee (Dr Tom Baudinette, Dr Rohan Best, Dr Fiona Bright, Dr Matthew Fernandez, Dr Jiye Kim, Dr Lyndon Koen, and Dr Evelyn Lim) for putting together a fabulous inaugural showcase.

**Dr Noushin Nasiri** (School of Engineering) and **Dr Vanessa Pirotta** (Department of Biological Sciences) for being selected to be part of the current [Superstars of STEM](https://www.STEMSuperstars.org) cohort.

**Dr Noushin Nasiri** (School of Engineering) and **Dr Alexandra Carthey** (Department of Biological Sciences) for being awarded an [FSE Excellence Award](https://www.fseawards.com) for Early Career Researcher. Also congratulations to the highly commended ECRs — **Dr Lyndon Koen**, **Dr Fatemah Salehi**, **Dr Xi Zheng** for Inter-Departmental Collaboration for their ECR Mentoring Program.

Our current and former FSE Reps **Dr Amy Cain** (Department of Molecular Sciences), **Dr Matthew Fernandez** (Department of Chiropractic), **Dr Mike Swain** (Department of Chiropractic) and **Dr Chris Lustri** (Department of Mathematics and Statistics) for being award the [FSE Excellence Award](https://www.fseawards.com) for Inter-Departmental Collaboration for their ECR Mentoring Program.

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Our ECRs in the press

**Dr Tom Baudinette** from the Department of International Studies, Languages and Cultures provided comment to [South China Morning Post](https://www.scmp.com) regarding concerns over a new virtual K-Pop girl group.

**Dr Andrew Burridge** from the Department of Geography and Planning was interviewed on [3AW Breakfast](https://www.3aw.com.au) regarding state border closures.

**Dr Lloyd Cox** from the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations was interviewed on [ABC Radio PM](https://www.abc.radio) regarding the results of the US presidential election.

**Dr Lizzy Lowe** from the Department of Biological Sciences was interviewed on [ABC Radio Sydney Breakfast](https://www.abc.radio) about a warm wet start in Eastern Australia to summer providing ideal conditions for spiders, especially funnel-webs.

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So long, farewell 2020…

...and don’t let the door hit you on the way out.

I started this year’s newsletter with the comment “it can be hard to feel the freshness, the hope, the determination when all around us is smoke, bleakness, and despair.”

Having finally reached December, despite it still feeling like it is March, it is tempting to self-cite myself and say that in the wake of an ongoing global pandemic, mass job cuts within the university sector, and everything else that 2020 decided to throw at us these words are still fitting.

But while in order to move forward it is important to recognise and acknowledge that this has been a hard year for everyone – especially for ECRs – being overly dramatic and maudlin probably won’t help in the long run (although on occasion it can be entertaining).

So instead, I’d like to reiterate a different quote that I included at the beginning of the year: “what you do matters” (A/Prof Inger Meiwbern, The Thesis Whisperer).

Whether it is directly through your research, your teaching, your supervision and mentoring, your scrambling to get all research and teaching and supervision online for a sudden forced change in lifestyle (#WFH), or your support of other researchers and fellow ECRs, what you do matters.

Admittedly, you don’t always get recognition or acknowledgement or appreciation for it. So as we farewell 2020, on behalf of the ECR Network Team I’d like to recognise, acknowledge, and share our appreciation:

We recognise and acknowledge, that 2020 was a difficult and trying year. I think it is fair to say that whatever your situation it was an exhausting process (personally I am about ready to hibernate. Except that it is summer. And I am not a bear).

We recognise and acknowledge that there is ongoing uncertainty that looms over the university sector and the world in general. And that this is mentally taxing for ECRs, especially when the end of that uncertainty is also uncertain (fellow ECRs Dr Melina Gandy and Dr Andreea Heriseanu have provided some advice on dealing with this).

We recognise and acknowledge that over the next few months, years, decades even, many of you will move away from academia.

And we also recognise, acknowledge, and appreciate the incredible amount of hard work, energy, and time you have put into this past year and will continue to do so in the future. What you do matters.

So cheers to making to the end of 2020. We wish you and your loved ones a safe and, hopefully, happy holiday that will bring joy and rest and whatever else you need to mentally and physically prepare for 2021!

~Megan Brewer and the ECR Network Team
2020 has been a challenging year for the University sector and the future of academia looks uncertain. Many ECRs have found their emotional wellbeing has been impacted in some way including an increase in stress, anxiety, and low mood.

We have put together this guide of 7 Tips to validate ECRs’ concerns and introduce some basic coping strategies. Don’t worry – we won’t tell you to just “be resilient” or “practice mindfulness”…. while these things can help on some level, for many people these suggestions feel like a cop-out, and fail to acknowledge that things are tough and that managing wellbeing is not that simple.

Milena and Andreea are both early career researchers with combined PhD /Doctors of Clinical Psychology. We hope you find it helpful.

**Tip 1: Some Poor Wellbeing is Normal.**

If you felt some level of poor emotional wellbeing or distress this year, you’re not alone! Stress, anxiety and low mood are normal and human, especially when we are managing something challenging.

Some ECRS have expressed feeling anxiety and helplessness about potential jobs cuts and more limited job opportunities into the future. Some are feeling a sense of grief and loss that their academic trajectories may be changing and others are feeling stressed about potential increased workloads and a changing work culture.

Unfortunately, we can “beat ourselves up” for having these normal human reactions and feel like we are alone or at fault in this experience, when it is most often an interaction of individual and situational factors (such as being placed in a difficult or environment, with not enough support).

So, those feelings of poorer emotional wellbeing are understandable, and many people are experiencing this!
Of course some people experiencing more significant distress, burn-out, anxiety or depression, these signs warrant more concern and need for support.

**Tip 2: Focus on Helpful Support Networks.**

During times of change and uncertainty people will often want to talk about what they’re worried about. This can help us process concerns and get support from others. However, it can very easily tip into rumour and gossip, which cause even more stress and worry.

You might have noticed an increase in rumours about job changes in the University sector. For instance, “Did you hear all ECRs are going to be made redundant??” or “Did you hear that ECRs will be forced to remain at Level A forever?” It is okay to take a break from unhelpful conversations, especially if you feel like you’re becoming even more anxious or upset.

During times of uncertainty and stress it is particularly important to surround yourself with helpful networks and social interactions. This might involve setting some boundaries on how much you participate in rumour mills at work and spending time socialising with people outside of your field, or outside of academia altogether.

**Tip 3: Jump off the Hamster Wheel of Worry**

During periods of change and uncertainty it is common to notice an increase in worries. Many of these worries may be very real and understandable. In fact, some worry can be helpful when it is short-term because it leads us to act or problem-solve. For instance, worries about employment uncertainty may prompt some ECRs to invest in exploring other career options (e.g. the “AltAc” or “PostAc” world).

However, we can get stuck in unhelpful and destructive cycles of worry. These cycles can escalate and we can find ourselves imagining the very worst case scenarios. These types of worries love to rear their ugly heads in the wee hours of the morning ... thanks brain!

Managing worries is not easy or simple. However, as a first step some people find working through a *Worry Decision Tree* (see below) can introduce a circuit breaker to “the mental hamster wheel of worry”. This decision tree isn’t a “magic fix” but is designed to help us reflect on whether the worry we are experiencing is either:

1. **Productive worry**: Related to a problem we can do something about, or
2. **Unproductive worry**: Hypothetical “what if” worry, about something that might happen, but we don’t know, or cannot control.

We can also tackle our worries by questioning them and trying to prevent them spiralling to a worse place. For instance, ask yourself:
• Am I spending too much time and energy worrying? (if yes, see Worry Decision Tree)
• Is this worrying stopping me from doing something that might help?
• Am I worrying about something I cannot control?
• Am I underestimating my ability to cope? I have dealt with stressful things before...
• Am I dwelling on the worst-possible scenario?

Further resources of managing worries and problem solving can be found at the MQ MindSpot Clinic website https://mindspot.org.au/coronavirus

Figure 1: Worry Decision Tree

**Tip 4: Dial Down the Internal Critic**

There is often a streak of perfectionism and self-deprecation running through the ECR pool, which can get more activated in times of high stress. Perfectionism can lead to high performance, but can also result in us putting a lot of pressure on ourselves. Self-deprecation may keep us humble but can lead us to unfairly critiquing and belittling ourselves and our achievements.

Managing negative self-talk is a tricky skill that takes time and practice. We have often developed a way of thinking that has been there for decades and is not
going to distractedly change from reading this brief guide. Nevertheless, there are some things we can do to check in around our self-talk.

Below are some questions we can ask ourselves to help challenge or “dial the volume down” on our negative self-talk

- Am I expecting too much of myself?
- Am I speaking to myself in an unhelpful or unkind way?
- Am I setting unrealistic expectations of myself? A hint these usually have the words “should, ought, must, never” in them... e.g., “I should never ask for help”
- Would I speak to a friend like this?
- Am I minimising my own achievements and skills?
- Am I spending too much time comparing myself to others?*

*Many academics find their negative self-talk can be triggered when they compare themselves to others. It is important to acknowledge we are in a competitive industry and comparing oneself to others often comes with the territory. Who hasn’t stalked someone’s Pure profile and been left feeling a little deflated? We need to check in around how often we do this as it rarely provides the motivational push we hope for and it can lead to enjoying our work less and feeling more pressure.

Tip 5: Focus on What’s Important

We are constantly being told about the importance of “work-life balance” and it’s no surprise that having some down time is important for our emotional wellbeing. However, we do understand this is often easier said than done! Below are some areas we suggest reflecting on.

Healthy Life Pie: Imagine your life as a pie-chart. How much of it is work? Chances are our work takes up a good percentage. However, many people value more than just “academic success” and are striving for more on their epitaph than a record of a sky-high h-index! It can help to reflect on the other things we value beyond academia (e.g., time with friends, playing with kids, fitness, cooking etc.) and really make the effort to hive off time and energy for these things.

Routines are important. It is hard to manage our emotional wellbeing when our routines are chaotic and we are struggling with the basics including getting regular sleep, eating well and staying active. It sounds mundane but spending time focusing on these routines and how to improve them can make a really big difference.

Schedule breaks. Breaks are super important for our wellbeing, especially if you are feeling overworked and stressed. They don’t have to be long periods of leave just dedicated time set
aside for de-stressing and unwinding (e.g., odd long weekends away). Breaks may feel counterproductive when under a lot of work stress but can lead us to being more productive in the long run.

Tip 6: Burnout is Not the New Normal

We have all probably heard the term burn-out or had some signs of this during our PhD or early research careers. Sadly, most of us rarely recognise burn-out coming, especially if we are passionate about what we do, or in a position where we work long hours, with heavy workloads. Burn-out is the state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by chronic stress; not only does it reduce work productivity, but it spills into other areas of life as well.

Some signs of burn-out include:
- Feeling overwhelmed and emotionally drained.
- Unable to meet usual demands
- Losing interest and motivation.
- Low energy or feeling cynical or resentful.

It’s important to try and address stress and burn-out, as much as possible, before it turns into more serious and chronic issues. Apart from the above tips it can be really helpful to confide in a trusted mentor during these times – someone who has been through the ECR phase and can empathise.

Tip 7: Knowing How and When to Get More Support

There may be times when feelings of stress, anxiety, and low mood start to interfere with our lives and we may require more support. As a general guide this can occur when our symptoms start to:
- Interfere with our ability to function how we would like day-to-day.
- Occur more days than not.
- Occur at times when there does not seem to be an obvious cause.
- Include hopelessness, irritability, marked loss of interest or pleasure, or a sense of dread.
- Change our sleep and eating patterns for the worse.
- Include thinking about self-harm or suicide.

It can be challenging to go through periods of very poor emotional wellbeing. However, there is good support available, including:
- Employment Assistance Program – confidential counselling service to staff and family members  
  [https://staff.mq.edu.au/work/wellbeing/employee-assistance-program](https://staff.mq.edu.au/work/wellbeing/employee-assistance-program)
- Your GP can arrange a Mental Health Care Plan which allows you to see a psychologist in the community for up to 20 Medicare-subsidised sessions a year.
- BeyondBlue has information and advice on mental health: [https://www.beyondblue.org.au/](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/)
- MindSpot Clinic is a digital mental health clinic  [https://mindspot.org.au/](https://mindspot.org.au/)
Researcher Development Opportunities

Research at a Distance: Japan Studies in an age of Covid-19 2-Day Workshop
January 21-22

This two-day online Research Training Workshop aims to support Australia-based scholars in adapting their research to an age of Covid-19.

The Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions present a serious challenge to Australia-based scholars wanting to conduct data collection and/or archival research in Japan. For PhD students and early career researchers especially, developing strategies to overcome these restrictions is essential, both for the immediate success of their project and for their future careers.

This workshop aims to support Australia-based scholars working on Japan to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, both substantively (considering its ongoing implications for Japanese society) and methodologically (assessing its impact on research strategies and tools). Over two morning sessions, scholars will hear presentations from experts in Japan Studies and collaboratively workshop their research plans with experienced mentors.

The organisers particularly encourage participation from graduate students, early career researchers, and vulnerable scholars. An honorarium of AUD$150 will be offered to up to 15 vulnerable scholars who apply to participate in both days of the workshop.

The workshop is kindly supported by the Japan Foundation, Sydney and is hosted by the University of Melbourne.

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Funding Opportunities

A reminder that all funding applications should be submitted through PURE, well ahead of the funding body deadline, to leave time for approvals by HoD, ADR, and Research Services. Check with your Faculty Research Office to find out about timelines for submission.

Internal and External funding opportunities are listed on the Fellowships and Grant Opportunities page. Current opportunities include:

- ARC Discovery Projects, Jan 20 (FSE submission), Jan 27 (All other faculties submission date), Feb 24 (ARC submission date)
- ARC Indigenous Grants, Feb 17 (MQ submission date), Mar 17 (ARC submission date)
- MQ Fellowship for Indigenous Researchers
- MQ Co-funding Scheme
- MQ Enterprise Partnerships Scheme
- MQ DVCR Discretionary Fund

The Research Professional Database is available for Macquarie researchers to search for fellowships, grants and prizes by discipline area.
**Australian Parliamentary Fellowship**

**January 31**

The *Australian Parliamentary Fellowship* is managed by the Parliamentary Library on behalf of the Parliament. The purpose of the Fellowship is to:

- contribute to scholarship on the Parliament and its work;
- promote knowledge and understanding of the Parliament;
- raise awareness of the role of the Library’s Research service;
- provide a researcher with work experience in the parliamentary environment; and
- support “early career” scholars (PhD awarded within the last 3 years).

The Fellowship is of flexible duration (up to 6 months full time with provision for part time or broken periods of employment) in the Research Branch of the Parliamentary Library. A successful applicant for the 2021 Fellowship would be expected to take up the position in the second quarter of 2021.

**Prizes, Awards, and Competitions**

- **Fame Lab**, Feb 25

For a full list of external prizes please visit: [https://staff.mq.edu.au/research/resources-and-support/prizes,-awards-and-fellowships](https://staff.mq.edu.au/research/resources-and-support/prizes,-awards-and-fellowships)

**ECR Notice Board**

Keen to reach out to other ECRs across campus? Want to find someone to collaborate with? Explain R to you? Explore Sydney’s best walking tracks? Or just looking to connect with others? The ECR Notice Board is the place to go. Just send us a brief message (no more than 50 words) with your MQ email and, if appropriate, we’ll include it here in the newsletter.
Your ECR Representatives

Do you know the ECR representatives in your Faculty and Department? The following ECRs meet every two months as part of the ECR Network Advisory Group, led by Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research Integrity and Development), Professor Lesley Hughes, to discuss issues and identify solutions to the challenges specific to ECRs:

**Faculty of Arts**
- Dr Tom Baudinette
- Dr Katrina Hutchison
- Dr Sarah Powell

**Macquarie Business School**
- Dr Laramie Tolentino
- Dr Han Li
- Dr Rohan Best

**Faculty of Medicine, Health, and Human Sciences**
- Dr Elizabeth Austin
- Dr Jean (Jinhyun) Cho
- Dr Marina Junquiera Santiago

**Faculty of Science and Engineering**
- Dr Amy Cain
- Dr Matthew Fernandez
- Dr Michael Swain

**Research and Research Training Committee Representatives:**
- Dr Milena Gandy (Faculty of Medicine, Health, and Human Sciences)
- Dr Mauricio Marrone (Faculty of Business & Economics)

If you would like something raised with the ECR Network Advisory Group, please contact your Faculty representative.

Let us know what else you’d like to see in this newsletter. Email ecrsupport@mq.edu.au with your suggestions and feedback.

Don’t want to receive these emails? Please unsubscribe here.

https://staff.mq.edu.au/research/resources-and-support/early-career-research-network

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