

## World Café Report

At the NECTAR Forum 2018, the early- and mid-career academics (EMCAs) of ANU gathered to discuss issues and challenges affecting them and the skills and support they need. Part of this event was a 'World Café'-style recorded deliberation.

A World Café is a facilitated process that engages participants in short but meaningful conversations in a café-style setting. The discussions at the different tables are facilitated by a table host and participants move between the tables periodically.

At this event 40 EMCAs deliberated on seven different topics. Individual reports from four of these tables were written by the EMCA table hosts and collated by NECTAR staff. The topics were: major challenges faced by EMCAs, teaching and recognition, research translation and engagement and planning an EMCA survey to investigate the EMCA situation at ANU. The discussions of the remaining tables are either documented elsewhere or generated questions for other sessions.

### **Table 1: What are the challenges faced by EMCAs? What are their needs? What questions do they have?**

*Table host: NECTAR Custodian Dmitry Shishmarev*

This discussion identified the following main challenges/issues facing EMCAs at ANU:

- Job insecurity (short employment contracts leading to a lot of uncertainty ahead)
  - This is the main concern for the majority of EMCAs: job insecurity makes it hard to plan personal lives and has a strong impact on EMCAs' families.
- Lack of funding sources (tough competition for research funding in the EMCA space; not a lot of support from the ANU in that regard)
  - There is a feeling that University does not provide enough research funding that goes directly to EMCAs. Obviously, funding is always limited, but ANU should not try to save money on other activities at the expense of EMCAs. Such attitude would be wrong as EMCAs are the future on this University and thus should not be neglected and under-funded.
- Lack of identity and clear expectations
  - For example, sometimes it is not clear who EMCAs are and what their primary goals/responsibilities are.
  - Some EMCAs feel like they carry out a lot of 'project management', rather than true academic research and others even say they have to play roles of 'service personnel' or 'personal assistants' for their supervisors.

- Structural/cultural differences
  - For EMCAs that come from overseas, structural/cultural differences might be an obstacle for clear understanding of what is ‘the norm’ and what is expected from them as EMCAs.
- Work overload
  - Many EMCAs feel that expectations from them are too high. They feel like they are forced to overcommit, but if/when they fail to meet the expectation (as they are not ‘supermen’), it might lead to additional stress, thus further affecting their performance in a negative way.
- Power dynamics
  - EMCAs feel like their careers are too dependent on their supervisors, thus they don’t have much bargaining power in their discussions and quite often are forced to do things which are not necessarily part of their job description.

The following recommendations were suggested to improve the situation:

- Introduction of ‘minimal’ employment terms
  - For example, a minimum contract duration of 3 years, with the same/similar employment benefits as tenured positions.
- Introduction of ‘permanent scientist’ or ‘permanent postdoc’ positions, like in some European Universities.
  - Funding for these roles might come from a central pool of money (for example, made up from small contributions from each grant that ANU scientists obtain every year).
- Re-definition of the roles of PhD students and EMCAs
  - The expectations should be set clear from the beginning that only a small fraction of PhDs/EMCAs will end up with permanent positions in academia; thus, a broad range of skills should be nurtured, which will prepare EMCAs better for getting jobs outside academia.
- Mandatory and regular trainings for supervisors/mentors/advisors to improve their roles in the EMCAs’ well-being
  - For example, it is important to make supervisors understand the importance of EMCAs’ career development so that they play a bigger role in that aspect.
- New ANU-wide policies which define clear/realistic expectations in terms of EMCAs’ performance and relationships between EMCAs and their supervisors.
  - This might potentially change of the culture/mentality about unrealistically high expectations from EMCAs.
- Better promotion policies at ANU.
  - The goal of this is to encompass the broad range of activities that EMCAs normally perform and don’t focus too much on the ‘standard metrics’.

- Better facilitation of the networking of EMCAs with their peers and more senior academics.
  - Experience of other academics might help EMCAs understand better 'how the system works' and what are the best strategies for a successful academic career.
- Somewhat more radical ideas:
  - Make all jobs non-tenured, thus overcoming the fear that the University currently has by committing to each new tenured position. In the long-run, this strategy might create more 'permanent' jobs (although less secure ones).
  - EMCA 'rebellion' with the goal of 'forcing' the University into implementing some of the above-mentioned suggestions/recommendations.

## Table 2: Teaching and its recognition – Preparation for discussion with DVC (Academic) and PVC (Education)

*Table host: NECTAR Custodians Rebecca Gidley and Hilary Howes*

In preparation for the discussion with Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and Professor Grady Venville, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education), EMCAs discussed different aspects of teaching and its recognition at ANU.

- It is important to continue to work on ensuring that all of ANU reflects that teaching is valued.
- There are diverse career paths, not all well catered for or understood, including sessional academics and those returning to the university after periods away for work or personal reasons – how do we recognise the value of these staff? How do we action the respect for all staff? EFS is part of recognising teaching contributions but it is only one part.
  - There are difficult issues of diversity, equity and power relations for all employees but especially for those in insecure work, and this has broader societal implications.
- Along with the issue of promotions we also need to consider conversions from fixed term to continuing contracts – schools hiring 3 year positions that are teaching heavy to fill a gap – how will their contributions be assessed and what are the possibilities for conversion?
- We aren't good (yet) at recognising what good quality teaching looks like or of understanding the necessary time associated with it. Supporting students, going through issues with academic integrity, training in writing skills, large amounts of administration that can come along with a course. Dealing with plagiarism and disciplinary action takes away teaching preparation time and so the quality suffers.
  - Related to this, which students are we admitting and what skills do they have? Do they have the necessary language, academic skills, and academic integrity understandings to succeed? Where these aren't the case it adds to the teaching time necessary.
  - This time required for teaching is also related to planning aspects, timetable, Wattle set up etc., there are resources required for preparation for any teacher and these are particularly scarce for casual teachers.
- There is a failure of ANU to recognise the value of our own PhD graduations – these are potential staff who have institutional knowledge but they are not prioritised by ANU.
- Should there be a requirement for a teaching qualification? We have CHELT training but it is neither transferable nor recognised at other institutions, and EFS is only beginning to be recognised by other Australian universities – would it be more valuable to have an understandable qualification that emerged out of training? Would a mandatory teaching qualification be off-

putting to those who might want to teach a little as part of a research position but not enough to go through significant training? Again, EFS is a reflection on your existing teaching so not an effective substitute for those without any teaching experience.

- What is the NECTAR approach to interacting with the University Executive? We seek to pose questions constructively and to propose solutions, not just to put them on the spot.
- Is there a recognition that visiting fellows also act as teachers?
- Issues of interdisciplinary teaching – how do you do it? This fits well with parts of the Teaching and Learning Vision on students who can tackle problems not yet imagined.
- Is it appropriate that supervision is categorised as research for promotion purposes? Does this work in the humanities? Why is there a distinction between Honours students (teaching) and PhD students (research)?
- We say we want determined students so how do we support them to be so and to use these characteristics to improve their outcomes whilst at ANU?
- Casual staff – there is a lot of uncertainty and the problems of gaps between the semester in income, where is the support? This insecurity is also inefficient for the university and HR – hiring processes are repeated.
- There are some staff who want access to teaching opportunities for promotion at ANU or for their career prospects at the end of their terms at ANU but they aren't always given these opportunities.
- Is teaching valued? It is increasingly in rhetoric but in practice this is more questionable. Do we know what a good teacher looks like? There is an extreme level of autonomy in teaching and a lack of feedback. It is possible to seek out this feedback but no institutionalised process for doing so currently exists.
- What are the incentives and rewards for good teaching and how do we create a sense of importance around them? Teaching awards are part of this but not the whole picture, and how do we add to the prestige of these awards?
- Promotion guidelines – these can be too rigid, not everyone teaches, can something like clinical research projects be counted in a similar way as an alternative, and what about people where translation of research leads to delays in publications.
- Understudy model of teaching – employed in Engineering. For larger courses you shadow the experienced teacher and then take over yourself in the subsequent semester with mentoring. This is a valuable way to train teachers but it requires pre-planning, and investing time and resources (especially on the part of the experienced teachers who take on a mentoring role – how do we incentivise this?).

The five major questions we put to the DVC(A) and PVC(E) were:

1. We say we value teaching, but how do we put the rhetoric into practice? How do we learn to teach? Is there value in a mandatory teaching qualification? How about an understudy model?
2. Education indicators for promotion – how do we ensure non-traditional contributions (e.g. clinical research projects) are valued? Why is supervising PhD candidates considered ‘research’ rather than ‘teaching’?
3. Where do responsibilities start and end in a teaching role? How do we decide which students are admitted – are we admitting the right ones? Plagiarism, disciplinary action etc. make significant demands on time.
4. Impacts of casualization – inefficiency, societal implications.
5. Is there, or could there be, a clearer career path / trajectory for teaching staff, similar to discussions around converting postdocs into continuing positions?

### Table 3: Translating your research and engaging with external partners

*Table host: NECTAR Custodian Britta Förster*

At this World Café table, EMCAs discussed barriers to engaging in research translation and ways to overcome these barriers.

The discussion identified the following barriers:

- Researchers find it difficult to define/identify translation for their research.
- Key to translation is to develop a vision for application. Where is a place to assist individuals to develop such vision?
- Research impact is not easily defined and measurable beyond ‘typical academic metrics’ (publications index and journal impact factors). How to change culture in academia to accept and develop new ‘nom-academic’ measures for research impact?
- ‘Selling’ basic research with no immediate translatable outcome to industry is problematic.
- The academic does not have security clearance required by external partner (government institution or company).
- Career suicide:
- Engagement with the external partner (e.g. Gov. agency) leads to confidentiality constraints on publishing/no publications which may negatively affect future funding prospects and academic careers.
- Conflict with retainment of ownership of your research: loss intellectual property may prevent subsequent research in this area.
- Lack of supervisor’s support due a different focus. Particularly PhD students may not have the autonomy and ownership of their research to engage with external partners or translation is not in the supervisor’s interest.
- Researchers experienced insufficient support at the level of the Research School to negotiate with external partners.
- Potential industry collaborators are difficult to identify and access (lack of visibility, no open access websites).
- Difficulties in finding start-up resources and master the ‘start-up’ process.
- Knowledge of existing networks or ANU sectors specialised in assisting researcher in translation and innovation appear to many researchers as being ‘hidden’, only passed on by ‘word-of-mouth’ or confined to individuals who happen to have gained experience.
- Unclear directives from ANU Commercialisation Office during engagement and translation: program structure, expectations, milestones.

The following suggestions for improvements and solutions to overcome translation barriers were identified:

- NECTAR-facilitated workshop: coaching to articulate/pitch impact of research to external partners.
- Links to relevant to engagement with external partners and translation from the NECTAR website, possibly as a subsection on the NECTAR website.\*
- Integrate recognition of commercial impact into PDRs and academic promotions.
- Researchers should consider to work towards translation at all career stages. Is there anything NECTAR can assist with in the conflict between visions of students/researchers and supervisors?

\*Please note, a list of resources to be added to the NECTAR website is currently being developed and will be available soon.



**Table 4: EMCA Survey 2019 – What questions do we need to ask?**

*Table host: NECTAR Custodian Tracey Mylecharane*

In 2015, NECTAR commissioned an online survey of all EMCAs at ANU to learn about their experiences and opinions and identify their needs. The results of the survey have informed the University Research Committee's decisions and driven NECTAR initiatives, directly influencing professional development opportunities for EMCAs at ANU.

In March 2019, NECTAR will launch a longitudinal study extending the 2015 survey and adding the aspect of mental health of EMCAs. At this World Café table, EMCAs discussed aspects that should be included in the survey to inform future NECTAR initiatives and activities.

**1. Interdisciplinary research**

Participants expressed a keen desire for support when seeking to undertake interdisciplinary research. Currently there is either none, or little, support or guidance. Participants expressed a lack of direction of where to go to ask questions/seek guidance in relation to commencing interdisciplinary research. They do not know who to ask for support/assistance.

Possible questions for the survey to address this aspect:

- Are you undertaking interdisciplinary research?
- Are you planning to undertake interdisciplinary research?
- Do you have adequate support to undertake your current or planned interdisciplinary research?

**2. Positioning of PhD students**

Participants who are current PhD students expressed confusion when receiving university wide emails, when trying to ascertain whether they were the intended recipient of the emails, and when trying to ascertain eligibility to attend/register for certain events (eg, the NECTAR Forum, the NECTAR mentoring program, and so on). This did not relate only to NECTAR events, however this was a good example.

How can NECTAR be more of a space for PhD students? This is something that was posed as a question, however it seems to me that after agreeing on the definition of an EMCA for the purpose of NECTAR membership, this point may become moot as it is now clear that NECTAR is open to PhD students.

Participants expressed confusion around what to do next post-PhD, indicating that support on 'what to do next' etc would be valuable. For example, 'what does a post-doc look like? What steps should you take to prepare for your post-PhD academic career? What should PhD students be doing by way of publications' etc etc.

Possible questions for the survey to address this aspect:

- Are you a PhD student?
- As a PhD student, are you clear on your identity within ANU, and where you fit as a PhD student in the context of eligibility to participate in NECTAR and other EMCA organisations and event?
- As a PhD student, do you feel supported in planning your post-PhD academic career path? Would you benefit from more support/guidance to assist in developing/planning your post-PhD career path?

### 3. NECTAR Mentoring Program

The overwhelming consensus was that the NECTAR mentoring program has been the highlight for participants in their NECTAR experience to date. This was a wonderful discussion to have.

Participants expressed a keen desire for PhD student eligibility to be clarified, and I think I have addressed this above in terms of the definition of NECTAR members which will include PhD students.

One participant expressed that he would have found the mentoring program very useful towards the end of his PhD, saying that to have the objective advice of a mentor towards the end of his PhD would have been beneficial.

### 4. NECTAR events

Participants suggested that they would find some sort of **time management** workshop helpful. They also indicated that sometimes workshops can be too long, and are not necessarily efficient (for example, the first 30 minutes are great, but then they drag on and lose impact).

PhD participants indicated that they would find some sort of **timeline**, guidance on steps to be taking throughout their PhD, a valuable and useful resource. One participant stated “there is so much information out there, people don’t seem to know what they need to know, when they need to know it!”

Participants also indicated that a topic they would like to see addressed somehow by NECTAR for EMCAs is ‘**how to address reviewer comments**’ when they have an article peer reviewed. Another topic was ‘**what to do if you receive a negative SELT**’.

Suggestions were made for a Resource section on the NECTAR website, with papers, recordings and so on, that could be located on the site for EMCAs\*. **Blogs** might be another useful way for more senior academics to share information and tips with EMCAs.

Possible questions for the survey to address this aspect:

- Are you aware of the events held by NECTAR?
- What other topics/types of events, would you like to see offered by NECTAR?
- Do you find workshops a useful/effective way of learning/disseminating information?
- What other forums would you like to see offered by NECTAR? (eg, online forum participation, online presentations, short papers on topics, such as tips for better time management, etc).
- Would you find a Resources page on the NECTAR website useful? If so, what sort of information/topics would you like to see included?
- Do you think short 'blog' pieces contributed by other academics and researchers would be a useful way of sharing tips and information?

\*Please note, a list of resources to be added to the NECTAR website is currently being developed and will be available soon.

## **5. Networking support**

Participants indicated that the networking component of NECTAR is the most important thing for them, and praised NECTAR for this. To know that other people were experiencing the same issues they were experiencing, was very valuable and comforting.

Possible questions for the survey to address this aspect:

- Have you participated in NECTAR networking events?
- Are you interested in participating in NECTAR networking events?
- Are you aware of the networking events hosted by NECTAR?
- Would you like to see further networking events held by NECTAR? If so, what types of events would you like to see offered?

Would you attend seminars designed to assist with/offer support for, networking?

## **6. NECTAR Working Groups**

One participant communicated one of the early intentions of NECTAR which was to form working groups to work through various issues as and when they arose, so that meaningful communication could be had with the University Executive to address those issues and move forward.

Possible questions for the survey to address this aspect:

- Would you be interested/willing to join working groups from time to time, to address issues on behalf of NECTAR to be raised with the ANU Executive?

- How much time would you be able/willing to contribute to these working groups (per week/month...)?
- Would you prefer to participate face to face, via online (wattle forums) or via Skype meetings?
- Are there any issues that you can think of at the moment that you would like to see working groups established to deal with?

## **7. Identification of other NECTAR members**

One participant expressed a very keen desire to be able to identify other NECTAR members on campus, suggesting that she would very much like to be able to approach and build relationships with other members on campus at any given time. She would very much like to wear a pin!

Possible questions for the survey to address this aspect:

- Would you like to be able to readily identify other NECTAR members on campus? OR Do you think it would be valuable being able to identify other NECTAR members on campus?
- Would you wear an identification item, such as a pin, so that you could be easily identified as a NECTAR member?
- Would you approach other NECTAR members to network if you were able to identify them?