

To: Professor Brian Schmidt, Vice-Chancellor

From: NECTAR Custodians

Date: 29 March 2019

Dear Professor Brian Schmidt

Reference: Results on the proposed seven ideas for projects for the VC to work on with NECTAR

At the NECTAR Forum in July 2018, you agreed to work with NECTAR on issues affecting early-career academics (ECAs) at ANU and propose a list of seven projects to collaborate with NECTAR. The projects below have been compiled in conversation with ECAs across the University. In an open poll we determined the following order of priority for these projects (details and justification below):

1. **Internal research funding for ECAs**
2. **Beyond the academy professional development and internships for post-docs**
3. **Minimum term for postdoc contracts**
4. **Appropriate teaching load for researchers**
5. **Professional development (PD) opportunities and/or requirements**
6. **Leadership responsibilities for postdocs**
7. **“One of us” – casual and sessional staff valued as members of the University community**

We very much appreciate your support and recognition of the ANU early-career academic community and your offer to consider projects that will address our most pressing challenges. The NECTAR membership has lots of ideas and energy about how we can collaborate to implement these projects and we would welcome your suggestions or a discussion.

Please let us know if you would like more information, a more detailed plan on how these projects could be implemented or a short meeting.

Regards

NECTAR Co-Chairs

Claudia Munera, Rebecca (Becky) Gidley, Habiba Umme Hossain and Mohammad Saadatfar

Appendix – Project idea details

1. Internal research funding for ECAs

ECAs are reporting funding gaps between grants and contracts that cause undeserved stress and delay. They also report lack of funding for blue-sky research. While some Schools/Colleges have seed funding schemes for ECAs, there is a lack of equity of access across ANU. NECTAR proposes that ANU establishes an internal seed grant scheme that provides research funding for ECAs at ANU as an opportunity to address funding gaps and help ECAs to develop their research careers inside or beyond academy, as well as conduct blue-sky research and/or promote their research outcomes. This can also help ANU to build stronger relationships with other sectors. Support categories could be:

- ECA Fellowship for a period of 12 months contributing towards the ECA's salary.
- Support to establish cross-disciplinary research across Colleges.
- Support for ECAs with unsuccessful ARC or NHMRC grant applications to enable the ECA to conduct additional research and strengthen the grant proposal for the next round of submissions.
- Support to develop collaborations with relevant sectors, i.e. travel expenses and collaboration visits (workshops, meetings, COP, etc.).

2. Beyond the academy professional development and internships for post-docs

The ANU Strategic Plan 2018-2021 states that “We will nurture future researchers, shaping our research training to ensure our people are second to none, their qualifications understood to be of the very highest global quality, setting them up to lead in the academy, in industry and in civil society”. ECAs of ANU are aware that the majority of them will not be offered permanent positions at ANU, or in academia in general, and will have to eventually take on roles outside academia in their respective research fields and expertise. Yet ECAs at ANU are not appropriately supported in preparing for this transition and leaving academia is almost always still considered a failure. NECTAR would like to propose the following project to address readiness of ECAs and to start a cultural change around leaving academia:

‘Beyond the academy’ internships for postdocs is a proposed scenario where

- ANU supports ECAs in gaining experience beyond the academy in their research area or collaborative space, for example by creating paid internship opportunities with strategic placement support with industries, government organisations, NGO's or other relevant sectors.
- ANU campaigns for appreciation of academic skills and collaboration beyond academy.

3. Minimum term for postdoc contracts

Short-term contracts for ECAs are common at ANU, contributing significantly to the stress level associated with job insecurity. NECTAR proposes that ANU investigates the possibility of a minimum term for postdoc contracts, e.g. 3 years, and minimum contracts of 6 months for teaching staff who are teaching for one term. Notes:

- Note many concerns that this could potentially damage innovative funding and foot-in-the-door career options, such as those bridging from PhD to career employment for example).
- Exceptions must be allowed, e.g. short-term contracts to cover short funding gaps.
- Mechanisms need to be put in place to deal with funding gaps, e.g. ANU providing funding for remainder of contract if a grant only provides money for 2.5 years.

4. Appropriate teaching load for researchers

Many ECAs at ANU, including PhD candidates, have disproportionate teaching loads imposed upon them and report that they have not been in an (informed) position to renegotiate them. This makes significant

research outputs virtually impossible, negatively affecting track records and chances for permanent employment at ANU or other universities. On the other hand, many researchers at ANU have little or no opportunity to gain teaching experience at all, which does not nurture them to “lead in the academy”. Guidelines for teaching load expectations of ECAs and HDR candidates should be developed to better nurture leaders for the academy. NECTAR proposes that ANU establishes standards for teaching load measurement and a guideline for reasonable loading. If possible, a way to equally distribute the teaching load, would be beneficial. In addition, mechanisms to enable better (more informed and empowered) negotiation of teaching loads should be put in place.

5. Professional development (PD) opportunities and/or requirements

Further to idea 2, NECTAR proposes that ANU should take on a more active role in nurturing ECAs to be second to none, including transitioning into non-academic roles by encouraging non-academic PD this should include:

- Guidelines for PD time commitment expectation for ECAs, e.g. 10% of their time dedicated to PD (academic and non-academic) could be included in all job descriptions.
 - Setting a minimum PD requirement ensures a consistent approach across Colleges and gives ECAs negotiating power when dealing with less supportive supervisors.
- Ensure the ANU NECTAR Mentoring Program is funded to continue.
- Enabling ECAs at ANU to find mentoring from industry-based mentors with appropriate PD in how to lead mentoring relationships.

6. Leadership responsibilities for postdocs

Ownership of research projects often lies with the lab leader rather than the ECA conducting the research. NECTAR proposes that to nurture emerging researchers, as discussed above, ANU should support ECAs in gaining leadership responsibilities in research that can be clearly demonstrated and are consistent across all Colleges.

7. “One of us” – casual and sessional staff valued as members of the University community

Casual and sessional staff contribute significantly to the research and teaching conducted at ANU, yet they are often considered “not one of us” (quote from a leading figure in College Executive). NECTAR proposes a “One of us” campaign that sparks a cultural change towards a more inclusive and collegial University. As part of the campaign, casual and sessional staff in teaching and research positions

- should be allowed access to the same professional development, networking and collegiality opportunities as academic staff
- should be represented in ANU governance committees
- should be added to all relevant staff mailing lists (e.g. College and School mailing lists)
- should be able to be the chief investigators of the research projects they lead, where rules allow.

Furthermore, NECTAR proposes that ANU investigates accountability for hiring casual/sessional staff instead of employing staff on fixed-term or continuing contracts and whether current policies and practices are making it too easy to employ staff as casual/sessional without a competitive process, thereby compounding negative attitudes towards casual/sessional staff.