COVID-19 ECA Concerns: Survey Report
Alison Ciesla & Natalia Castano Rodriguez
Co-Chairs of the Early Career Academic Network Executive Committee

Abstract
COVID-19 has turned our personal and work lives upside-down. After hearing from many struggling Early Career Academics (ECAs), a quick survey was conducted by UNSW ECAN to gain insight into the issues causing most concern and how prevalent they are, how ECAs are coping, and determine what could be done to help. The key concerns identified from the 134 respondents (~10% of ECAs) centre around: job security (80%) with most ECAs on fixed term contracts, dissatisfaction with current communications due to lack of clarity but constant reminders of cost cuts causing anxiety, increased teaching/service workloads causing stress and impacting research outputs and hence promotion opportunities, and financial concerns both at work with funding cancelled and home with mortgages and young families on an already stretched salary. Action is needed ASAP to support ECAs; some possible initiatives include clear empathetic communication, strategies for prioritising future funding for ECAs and time allowance for career development, clear guidelines for promotion relative to opportunity, an ECAN workshop to help those in need of transition from academia and/or get the most of UNSW.

Background:
Six weeks after working from home commenced due to COVID-19, ECA representatives were increasingly hearing common concerns from ECAs. Recognising the need for a fairly urgent response, a simple survey was conducted over 48 hours to gain insight into the proliferation of issues among ECAs, how ECAs are coping and determine what we can do to help.

Method:
To ensure maximised and quick responses, the survey consisted of only two questions: 1 multiple choice for general concerns (select all that apply); 1 open ended for specific concerns. Survey questions:
1. Please tick all concerns that apply or are impacting you and your work (options in Fig. 1)
2. Do you have any other concerns, or are there any specific concerns causing you most stress?
Results and discussion:

134 of ~1400 ECAs (~10%) responded within a 48 hours survey period. This is an astounding response for our electorate given that, even with a prize, our past surveys have struggled to reach a 2% response. We also received an overwhelming 56 responses to the open-ended question. This highlights the importance of these issues to ECAs and the need to be heard.

The responses to the multiple-choice general concerns, provide insight into how widespread each concern is among ECAs; the results are shown in Figure 1. Notable points that are concerning:

- 80% are worried about job security
- 60% have funding concerns
- 50% are dealing with increased workload and anxiety
- More than 1 in 3 respondents are feeling disconnected and isolated, suffering from mental fatigue and/or overwhelm
- More than 1 in 4 respondents are concerned for family overseas and/or juggling childcare/home-schooling.
- ~30% of respondents have had collaborations impacted and/or dealing with lack of motivation.
- ~15% are suffering from financial issues at home and/or insomnia
- 9 respondents (6.7%) suffer from clinical depression
- ONLY 5 out of 134 respondents (3.7%) are so far not concerned with any of the above.

*Figure 1. ECA concerns (n=134 responses).*
The specific concerns* of ECAs showed many commonalities emphasising nine key issues that are of the utmost pertinence to ECAs:

- Lack of clarity, only knowing cost cuts are coming but no insights into how we will or may be affected, with frequent reminders that only exacerbate anxiety.
- Job insecurity is causing anxiety, for both existing contracts and future renewals, particularly with the majority of ECAs on fixed term contracts.
- Even more increased workloads for a cohort that typically do a disproportionate amount of the legwork (both teaching and research lab work).
- Marked increased teaching loads at the expense of research; reduced research affects ECAs who need outputs to progress their careers in an extremely competitive environment.
- ECAs are average mid 30s – they have huge financial responsibilities (new mortgages) and also often children to juggle with work/family to support. Their smaller salaries are already stretched.
- Less students and casual staff due to COVID-19 means less support for ECAs who are already struggling to establish an independent career.
- Start-up funds and other funding opportunities have been frozen or funds clawed back so even if society reopens, we will not recover this support.
- Feeling hopeless in academia without any other options; overqualified after skilling up with a PhD. The overall perception is that the current opportunities are slim to none.
- Impacted chances for promotion or successful fellowship outcomes.

*to maintain confidentiality and anonymity the personal responses are not included.

Some initial proposed initiatives to (somewhat) help:

- More empathetic and clear communications from senior management— What are the potential options being discussed? Are people legitimately worried and should be updating their CV looking at options? Or can they be reassured?
- Research funding is clearly a huge concern for ECAs. Can UNSW prioritise support of ECAs over senior academics when the university is in the position to help researchers again? This could be in the form of small seeding grants like the FRGP, conference travel, and publication fees. The aim here is to create schemes just for ECAs, and restore funding opportunities for ECAs that have been retracted in the last 5 years.
- “Quarantine time for EMCRs“ - aimed at providing EMCRs with “Quarantine time” to engage in activities (grant writing/own papers/community engagement) that they believe are required to further their career in academia. Proposed prior to COVID-19 so name should be revised – perhaps “career development time”.
- Clarity on how “relative to opportunity” is taking in consideration during promotion - guidelines for how to value lost work (including due to COVID-19 and Australian bushfire) to be eligible and how that will be recognised.
- ECAN to host a seminar/workshop to help people identify transferrable skills and update CV etc to gain new or supplementary work; and also what services at UNSW exist to help employees.

Conclusion:
ECAs are struggling. Action is needed ASAP to support this particular group who are the pipeline for future research.