

Measures to Support Early & Mid Career Researchers

Report of a survey conducted by the
Research Australia EMCR Working Group

**Championing Australian health
& medical research**
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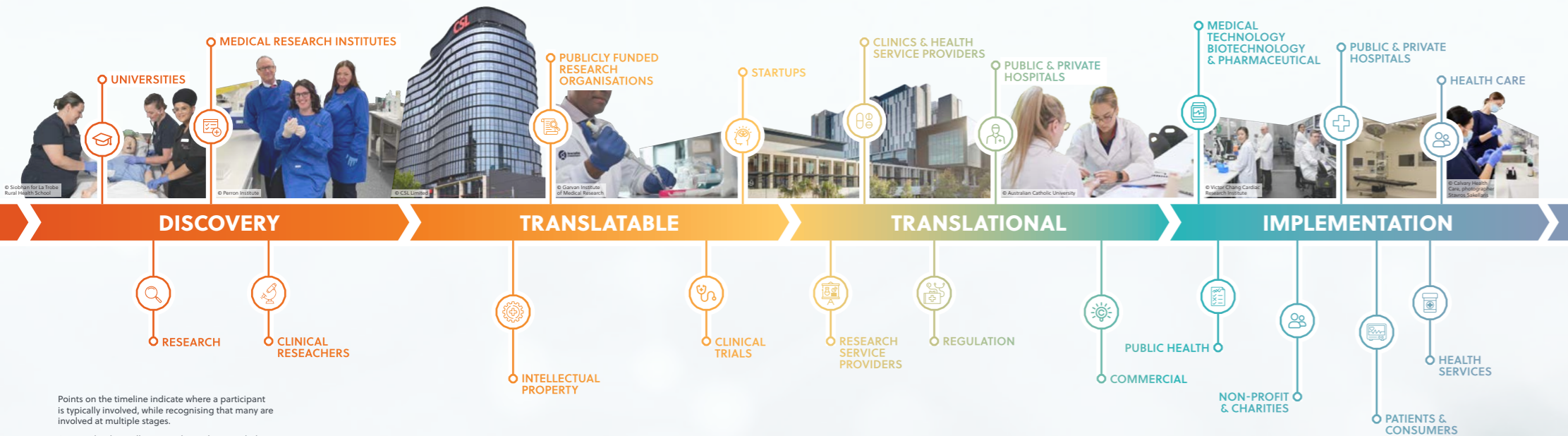
**RESEARCH
AUSTRALIA**

ABOUT RESEARCH AUSTRALIA

Research Australia is the national alliance representing the entire health and medical research (HMR) pipeline, from the laboratory to the patient and the marketplace.

Research Australia works to position Australian HMR as a significant driver of a healthy population and a healthy economy.

Research Australia pipeline:



Points on the timeline indicate where a participant is typically involved, while recognising that many are involved at multiple stages.
Sincere thanks to all our members who provided images.

MEASURES TO SUPPORT EARLY & MID CAREER RESEARCHERS

About the EMCR Working Group

The Research Australia Early to Mid Career Working Group (EMCRWG) was created in April 2022 to provide a forum to investigate matters of relevance to EMCRs in Australian health and medical research.

Its members are drawn from universities and medical research institutes nationally.

Its responsibilities are to:

- Identify and investigate the major challenges faced by current EMCRs in health and medical research, especially those that could be addressed through policy or workplace changes.
- Develop potential responses and solutions to the identified challenges.
- Share information and initiatives within the EMCR Working Group and with the broader Research Australia membership.
- Consider and provide advice to Research Australia to inform Research Australia's strategy, policy and advocacy in respect of EMCRs.
- Encourage engagement between EMCRs nationally.

About the Survey

The purpose of the survey was to identify the measures offered by EMCRs' workplaces to support their professional and career development.

The survey and this report were developed with the guidance and input of members of the EMCRWG.

The first response to the survey was collected on 22 May 2023 and the last on 14 August.

37 responses were received in total.

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INTRODUCTION

While there are no hard and fast rules, early career researchers (ECRs) are typically up to 6 years post the completion of their PhD and mid career researchers in the subsequent 10 or so years.

Completion of a PhD has typically taken 4 to 5 years and follows undergraduate study of 3 to 4 years, so if they commence their research training immediately after their undergraduate studies an early career researcher is typically in their late twenties or thirties, and mid career researchers are in their 30s and 40s. For researchers who also train as health professionals, it is common to initially work clinically as a doctor, nurse, midwife, or in allied health before commencing their research training, which they may complete over 6 to 10 years whilst they continue to work, so they may be older than this during their EMCR years.

Funding for health and medical research in Australia's universities and medical research institutes is heavily reliant on project based grants, provided for fixed periods. These grants can be as short as one year and as long as five. Modern health and medical research is not conducted by a lone figure at a laboratory bench; it requires teams of researchers with varying skills and at different career stages. Teams of researchers are assembled to undertake specific research tasks as required by the grant.

Employment is typically on fixed short-term contracts with a focus on the immediate research tasks and limited opportunities for career development.

Career progression in this environment involves moving from being a team member to an independent researcher, leading your own research team. Doing so involves securing your own research grant funding, assembling and managing a team of researchers and other staff, administering a budget and securing the next grant to ensure the research can continue and team members continue to be employed. These are all skills that need to be learned and developed along the way.

Not all researchers remain in academic/not for profit research; many move into careers in industry or government. The skills and experience required of researchers in these careers can be very different and the transition can be difficult; an early career researcher in an academic research team typically has little exposure to these roles and limited opportunity to develop the skills or gain the experience they need for such roles.

So what is being done to support EMCRs' professional development in academia and these other areas to advance their careers? The purpose of this survey was to identify the support and opportunities being provided to EMCRs in their current workplaces and to share information about what is available and what works.

Workplaces covered by this survey

Respondents to the survey were asked to identify whether their employer was a university, medical research institute or 'other' (e.g. a government research agency).

Just over half (54%) were from a university, a little more than a third (37.9%) were from a medical research institute and 8.1% identified their employer as 'other'.

Every State and Territory was represented except for the Northern Territory.

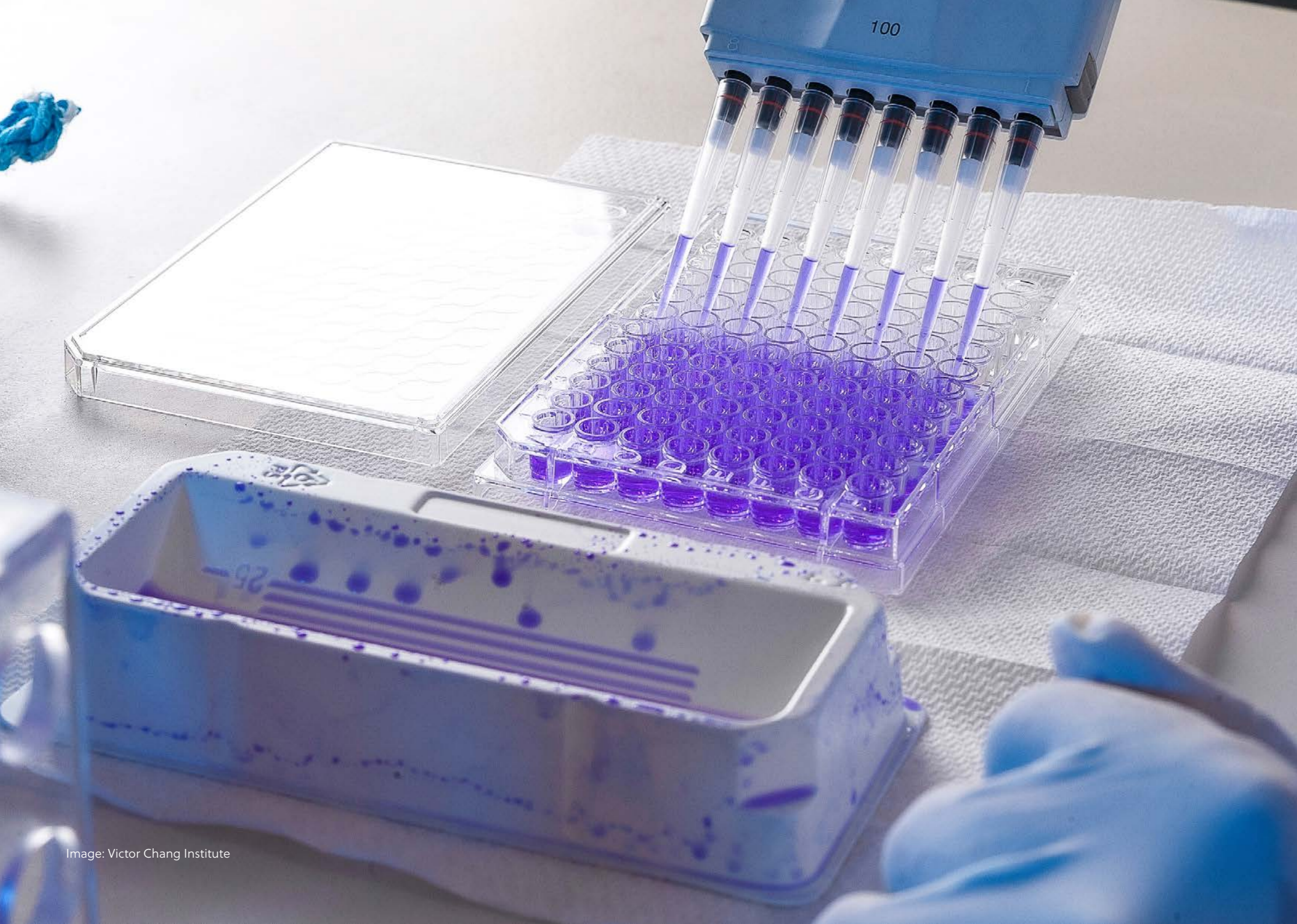


Image: Victor Chang Institute

INDUCTION PROCESSES

A formal induction process or program is important for many reasons. It helps ensure employees know what is expected of them, and how to work safely in their new workplace.

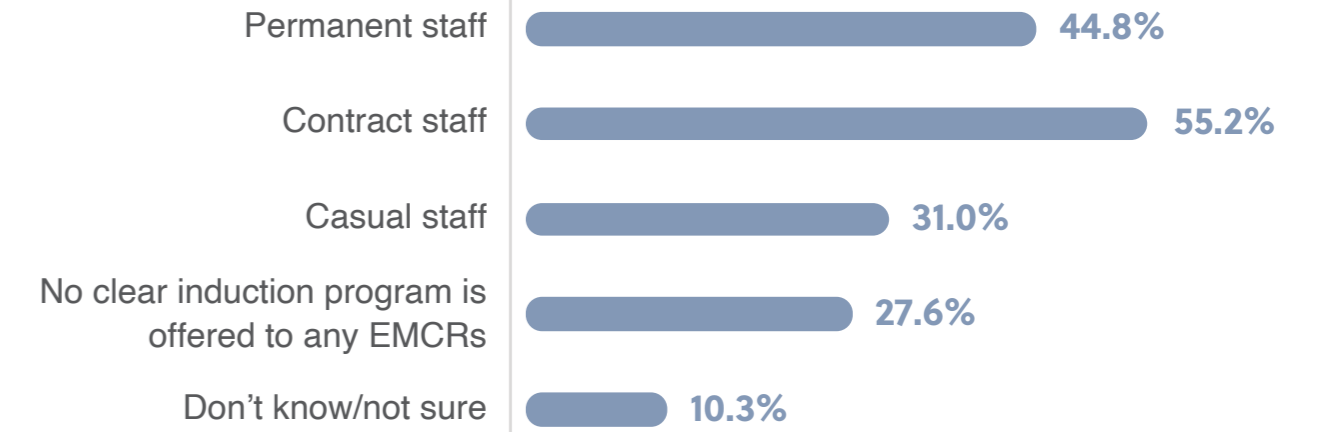
It provides information about the structure and values of the organisation they are joining. It helps ensure everyone is on the same page, with a shared knowledge and understanding of expectations and opportunities. This can help avoid misunderstandings between staff which can cause conflict, and promote equity.

It provides information about policies and processes the individual is expected to follow and avenues for seeking further information, or what to do when things aren't working out. It can also provide information about the policies, programs and supports available to individuals joining the organisation, whether as a casual, fixed term or permanent employee.



Over a **quarter (27.6%)** of respondents to the survey said their **organisation did not offer a clear induction process** for EMCRs. A further 10% were not sure.

My organisation has a clear induction process for new EMCRs who are:



Some of these induction programs were tailored to EMCRs while others were more general.

'There is an induction process for all staff but whether it's doing enough specifically for EMCRs, probably not. So my answer is no if you are meaning an induction process that has support and discussion points specifically to help EMCRs when they commence.'

'(In addition to the general university induction program) my team runs a Research Induction FastStart program that provides specific induction for research and research support staff. This is an optional full-day program offered 2 to 4 times per year (depending on the year).'

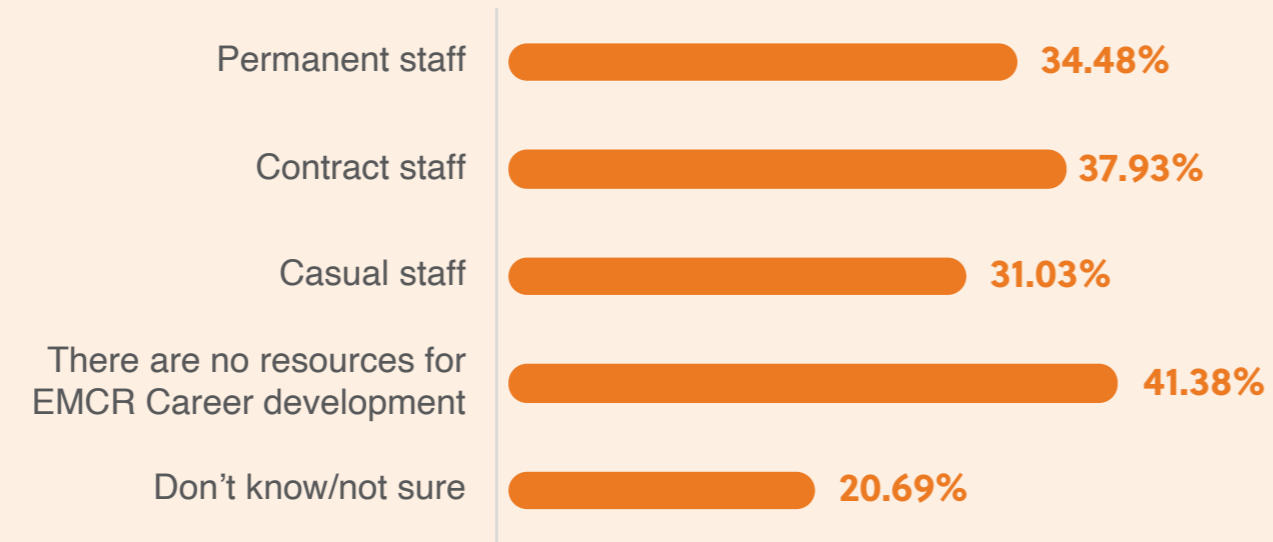
CAREER DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

Career development resources, such as short training courses and articles on different aspects of career development can be important sources of information for EMCRs but can also be hard to find, particularly in larger organisations.

They might be developed by a particular part of an organisation, in response to a specific event or identified need or for a specific purpose or audience. Having a centralised source of these resources, such as a website or webpage, or on a staff intranet can help promote the availability and use of these resources and promote equity of access.

Four in 10 (41.4%) reported there was no centralised source of career development resources for EMCRs, and a further 2 in 10 (20.7%) didn't know if such a central resource existed.

My organisation provides a centralised source of career development resources (e.g. website) for EMCRs who are:



'(The) Intranet - "For Me" tab includes a "My Career and Development" section with pages for LinkedIn Learning, training opportunities (research and non research topics) with links to the relevant internal or external website, LMS (Learning Management System) or contact.'

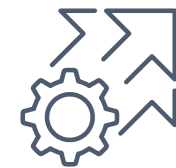


Image: La Trobe University

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

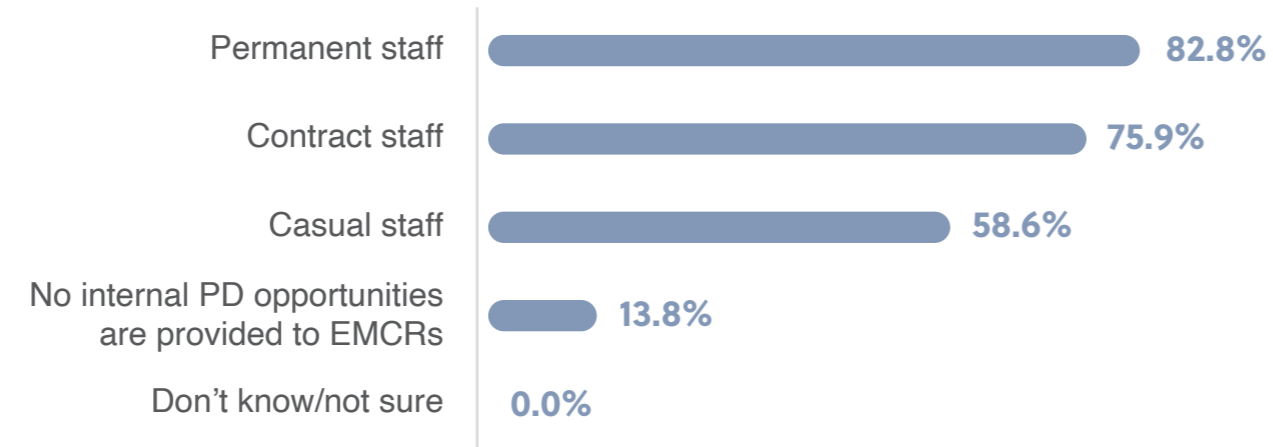
Professional Development opportunities can take many different forms and include formal training in aspects of team management and leadership, budgeting and project development, as well as opportunities to build networks and make professional connections by attending or presenting at seminars, conferences etc.

It is clear from the survey that internal professional development opportunities are widespread, with only 13.8% of respondents reporting no internal PD opportunities provided to EMCRs.



13.8%
of respondents reported no **internal** PD opportunities provided to EMCRs

My organisation provides internal professional development opportunities (PD) (e.g. networking, training courses etc.) to EMCRs who are:



'My team and key research support teams (e.g., Grants, Ethics and Integrity, Media, and external consultants) offers between 80-100 sessions a year, ranging from information sessions to professional development opportunities to a university-wide mentoring program for ECRs. Last year, 2301 researchers and research support staff attended these sessions. There are no restrictions for our information sessions.'

'There are free training events such as Essentials of supervision (so you can become a PhD supervisor), and leadership training. My clinical school is also supportive of me at my career conversations to highlight my interests and professional development needs and to then point me in the right direction. They are willing to pay for some additional training if I specify what I need.'

'(My organisation) puts on two industry networking functions for its researchers (not just EMCRs) annually. These are relatively low-budget events held on site. We also run seminars that include speakers from industry.'

When it comes to opportunities outside the organisation, the picture is less rosy, with nearly two in 10 (18.5%) reporting there were no external PD opportunities provided to EMCRs and a further 14.8% not sure.

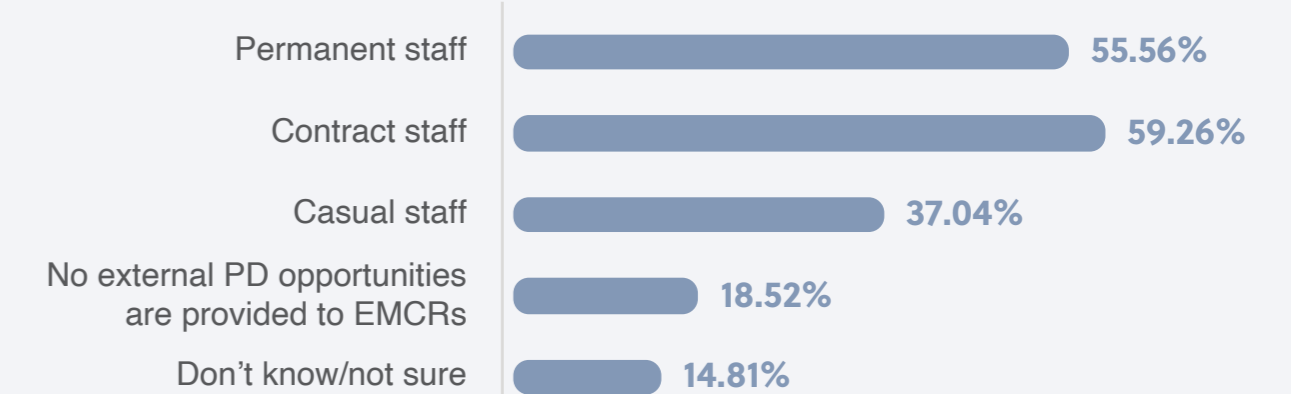
Not all opportunities come through an individual's direct employer; they may come via an affiliation.

'Each of us may be also linked in with other research groups and organisations. For example I am part of (an Academic Health Research Translation Centre) ... one of the subgroups sponsored myself and other EMCRs to attend research leadership training which was through a private organisation called Marlow Hampshire. It was really helpful.'



18.5%
of respondents reported no **external** PD opportunities provided to EMCRs'

My organisation provides external professional development opportunities (e.g. industry networking, seminars) to EMCRs who are:



'We have a Faculty-wide Career Development Committee that has a \$100K annual budget to organise professional development activities, grant writing support, career coaching, networking events for staff and titleholders. How the budget is allocated is determined by the Committee, which is comprised of EMCR representatives from each School.'

'The development programs run by external agencies are tailored and delivered to a nominated group of ECRs, MCRs, and senior academics--each group is nominated by the Deans of Research within their Colleges. Within each of the Colleges at (.), they also engage external organisations to run own development opportunities.'

'There are many training courses available that an EMCR can attend. There is a formal learning and development coursework platform, and as part of the post-doc fellowship there is funding to attend these internal/external trainings.'

'Sent randomly by email or in newsletters as opportunities come up.'

FUNDING FOR TRAVEL, PILOT STUDIES AND PUBLICATION

There is a range of purposes for which relatively small amounts of funding are essential in the development of a career.

Attending conferences can be expensive but is essential to expanding knowledge, keeping up to date with developments in your field and making connections with your peers.

Research grant applications often require initial data to support the application, and getting this data may require some initial experiments or a survey, all of which require money.

Advancing a career relies not only on undertaking research but publishing the results, and doing so can be expensive. Disseminating the results of your research can also involve presenting your findings to your peers, or perhaps to policy makers; again this requires money.

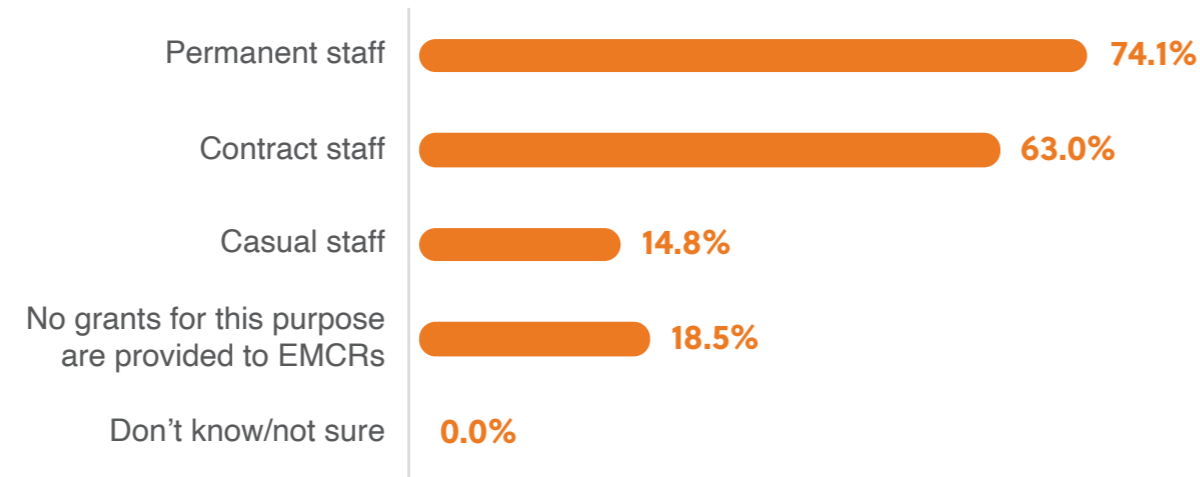
These types of expenses are often not covered at all by project focused research grants, or need to be incurred before that grant can be secured. Even where funding from a research project is available for one or more of these purposes, it might provide only very limited funding, and perhaps for just the most senior researchers. Finding funds for travel, initial experiments, publications fees and other purposes is always a challenge, both for EMCRs and their organisations.

The responses to our survey show that grants for these purposes can be hard to come by, especially for employees on casual contracts.

And the existence of funding for these purposes doesn't tell us how adequate the levels of funding are and how tightly the funding is rationed.

Nearly 2 in 10 (18.5%) reported that no grants were available to EMCRs for travel grants while large majorities reported these grants were available to permanent staff (74.1%) and contract staff (63.0%) Casual staff (14.8%) did not fare as well.

My organisation provides small travel grants (e.g. for conference-related flights and accommodation) to EMCRs who are:



'PD funding is about \$2000. it's competitive and not every year; hardly enough to go to an international conference.'

'I can ask my manager directly for funding for conference travel and other small pots of money.'

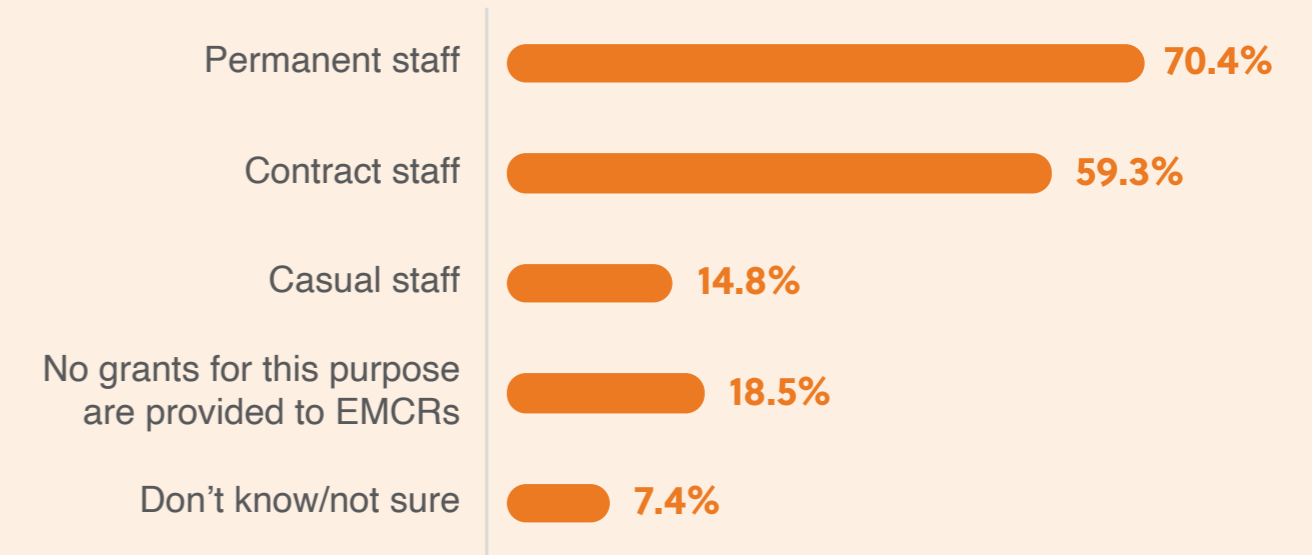
'Have to have a minimum contract of at least 12 months'

'Included in the postdoctoral fellowship there is an allowance for conference travel'

Pilot Studies

Results were similar for pilot study grants. Again, Nearly 2 in 10 (18.5%) reported that no grants were available to EMCRs for small pilot studies. Grants were reported as available to permanent staff at 70.4% of organisations and to a somewhat lesser extent to contract staff. Only 14.8% of organisations were reported to provide access to these grants to casual staff.

My organisation provides small pilot study grants (e.g. to collect preliminary data) to EMCRs who are:



'Last year we did have small grants for conjoint and academic staff and they supported me with two small ~\$12K grants.'

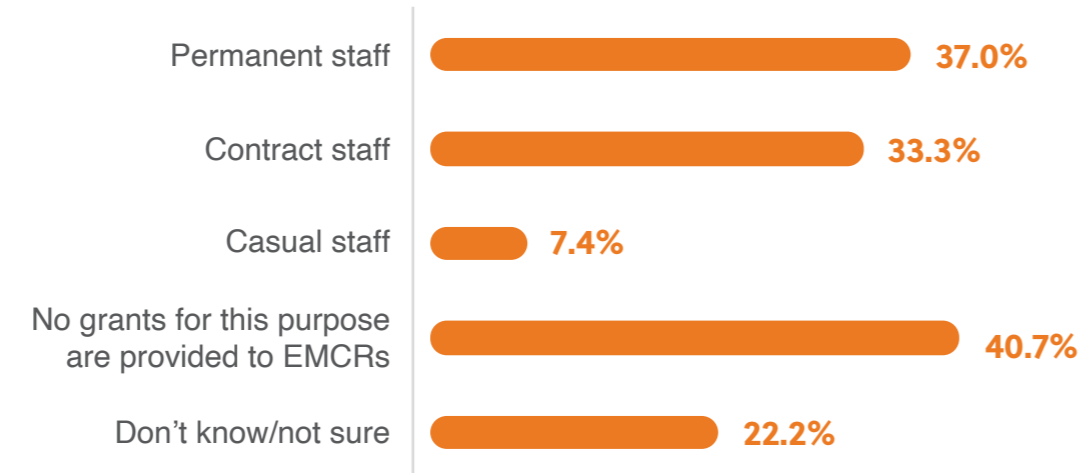
'We provide \$50,000 seed grants for new collaborations with EMC clinicians. We are limited in the number of grants we can fund.'

'There is the opportunity to apply for small acorn grants of \$20,000. Shortlisted candidates get "pitch training" before the final round to help with their application.'

Publication

Only around one third of respondents reported publication grants being available to permanent staff (37.0%) and contract staff (33.3%), with no grants for this purpose available to EMCRs reported by 4 in 10 (40.7%) and more than 2 in 10 (22.2%) unsure.

My organisation provides small publication grants (e.g. open access fees) to EMCRs who are:



'I think I could ask my manager for this.'

'Publication fees are a real problem... our team does really high quality research but publication fee is not supported... yet everything is 'measured' by number of publications... such a ridiculous system.'

'The Library has entered into "Read and Publish" agreements with several journal publishers to support open access publishing of UWA research at no additional cost to researchers.'

'Depends on the projects and availability'



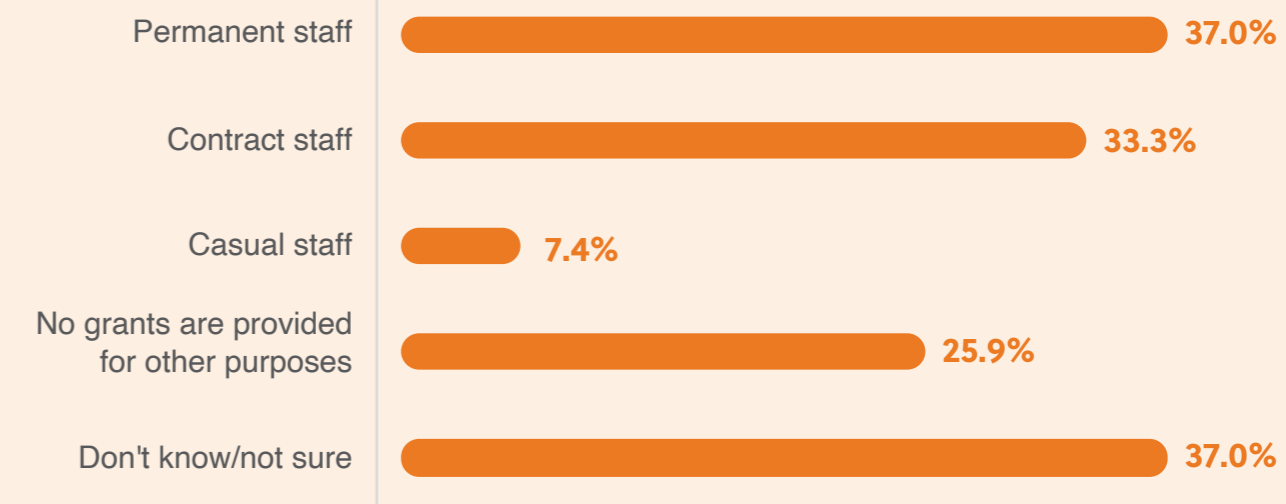
Only around **one third** of respondents reported publication grants being available to permanent staff

Grants for other purposes

Small grants for other purposes were reported for even fewer organisations, with one quarter (25.9%) reporting no grants available; and more than another third (37.0%) unsure.

Grants for this purpose were reported as available; for around one third of permanent (37.0%) and contract staff (33.3%).

My organisation provides small grants for other purposes to EMCRs who are:



'Specifically applicable to ECRs and MCRs are two awards, at two levels: (1) The School based 'Early Career Research Award' and 'Mid-Career Research Award', with winners proceeding to the VC categories for the corresponding awards. (2) ...Thanks to a generous donor, the ECR Awards (School and Vice-Chancellor's) come with a monetary prize.'

'Some other funds available depending on where within the University the staff member is located, these can be career development (travel or workshop training) and near miss funding.' 'I know we also provide funding to support overseas sabbaticals.'

MENTORING

Mentoring programs have grown in popularity in the last two decades.

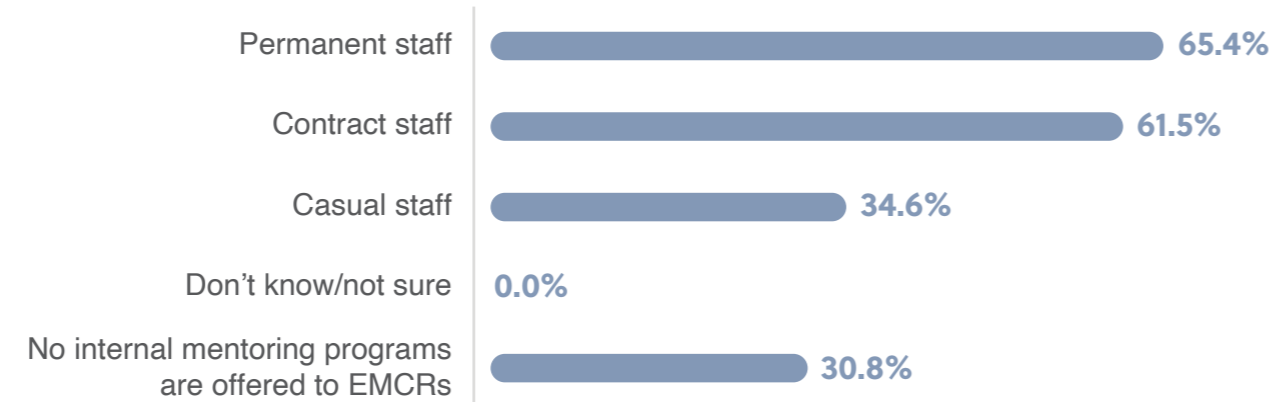
Once solely the realm of informal relationships, the perceived value of a good mentor has led to the formalisation of the idea, with training in how to be a mentor/mentee and the development of formal programs to recruit, match and support mentors and mentees.

3 in 10 respondents (30.8%) reported their organisation didn't provide internal mentoring programs between junior and senior researchers. Among organisations that did provide such programs it was mostly available to permanent and contract staff, but also to casual staff.



3 in 10 respondents reported their organisation didn't provide internal mentoring programs between junior and senior researchers.

My organisation provides internal mentoring programs between junior and senior researchers that focus on career and network advancement to:



'One School has had formal matched internal mentoring processes developed by Masters students in the Industrial/Organisational Psychology program. They also run more informal versions of this as required. These were popular but are vulnerable to staff workload, availability, logistical issues. Another School has informal mentoring for investigator/other grant applications.'

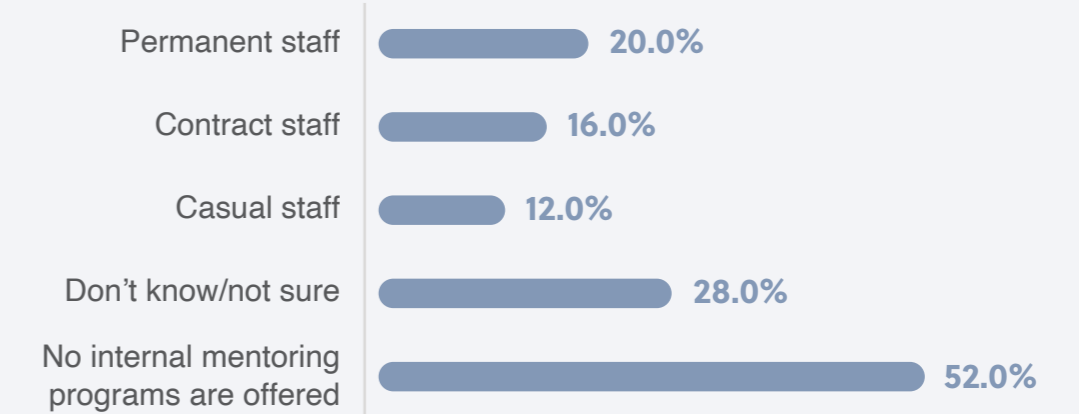
'The university-wide mentoring program is for researchers within 8 years of their PhD conferral, provided they are employed at least 0.4 FTE, and hold a contract that covers the duration of the program (i.e., February to November in one calendar year).'

'Mentoring is available for all staff. It is particularly an integral part of the post-doctoral experience that has a formalised component. ... several units have lists of staff that are available to mentor to make the initial process easier.'

Female MCRs

We asked specifically about mentoring programs for female mid career researchers, to support their transition to more senior roles. Half of all respondents (52%) reported that no internal mentoring program for this purpose was offered, with a further 28% unsure, suggesting the organisations offering such programs are in the minority.

My organisation provides internal mentoring programs to female mid career researchers through the transition to more senior roles who are:



'mentoring program for women at levels A-C to support career progression (includes executive and peer level mentoring support)'

'There is a specific leadership initiative for women (at least on my site) to provide mentorship.'

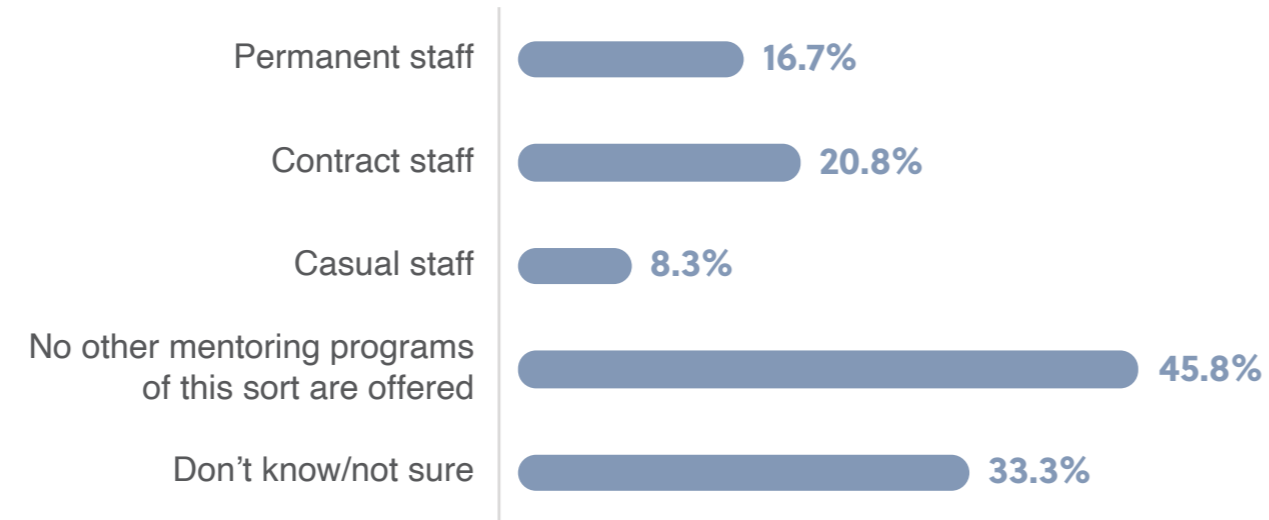
'Not sure if available to casual staff but specific mentoring is available for women applying for academic promotion.'

Others

Finally we asked specifically about whether there were internal mentoring programs directed to other groups.

Nearly half (45.8%) reported that no mentoring programs of this sort are offered, and a further third (33.3%) didn't know if they were offered.

My organisation provides internal mentoring programs for other groups or of a different type to:



External mentoring programs

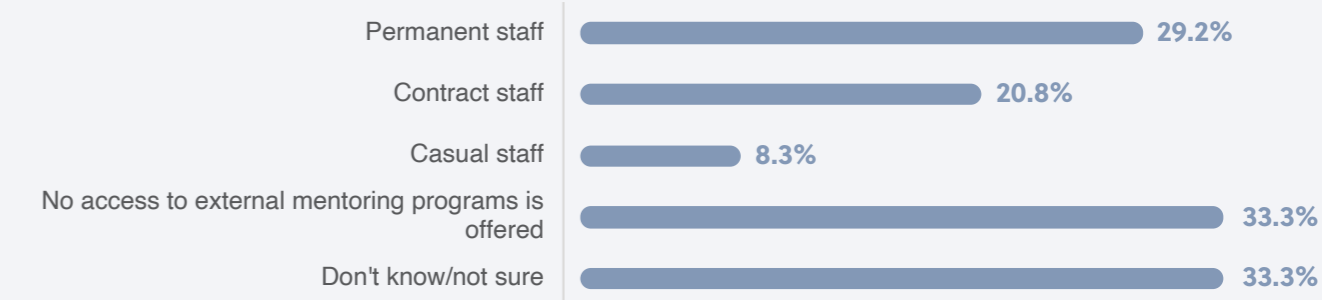
External mentoring programs have also become popular in recent years. They are particularly valuable for researchers who are considering a career outside universities and medical research institutes and are seeking an industry based mentor. One third (33.3%) reported there was no access to an external mentoring program and a further third were not sure. While the mentors and mentees are not paid, there is a cost to running these programs, which is typically borne by the research organisation from which the mentees are drawn.

The cost may be a factor in whether external mentoring programs are offered and how many places are available.



One third reported there was no access to an external mentoring program

My organisation provides EMCRs access to external mentoring programs e.g. Industry Mentoring Network in STEM (IMNIS) for:



'There is an opportunity to apply for other mentoring programs e.g. Franklin's Women. However, these opportunities are incredibly competitive e.g. only one space in Franklin Women's mentoring program supported per year (in an institute of 1000 people).'

'Franklin Women's, South Western Sydney Local Health District mentoring program'

'A pilot of a program to support development of meaningful mentor-mentee relationships and to deliver a research mentoring program. Senior researchers were invited by the DVCR to nominate as mentors and all EMCRs were invited to apply....there is a cap on places, they were awarded on a first come basis.'

'Not specifically offered, but I don't see that there would be an issue if an EMCR was to seek approval and pursue.'

'Researchers ... are eligible for IMNIS' (<https://www.atse.org.au/what-we-do/pathways-into-through-stem/imnis/>)

WELLBEING

EMCRs are recognised as being subject to significant levels of stress. Insecure employment, low success rates for research funding applications, high workloads and the challenges of navigating career pathways can all contribute to poor health and wellbeing.

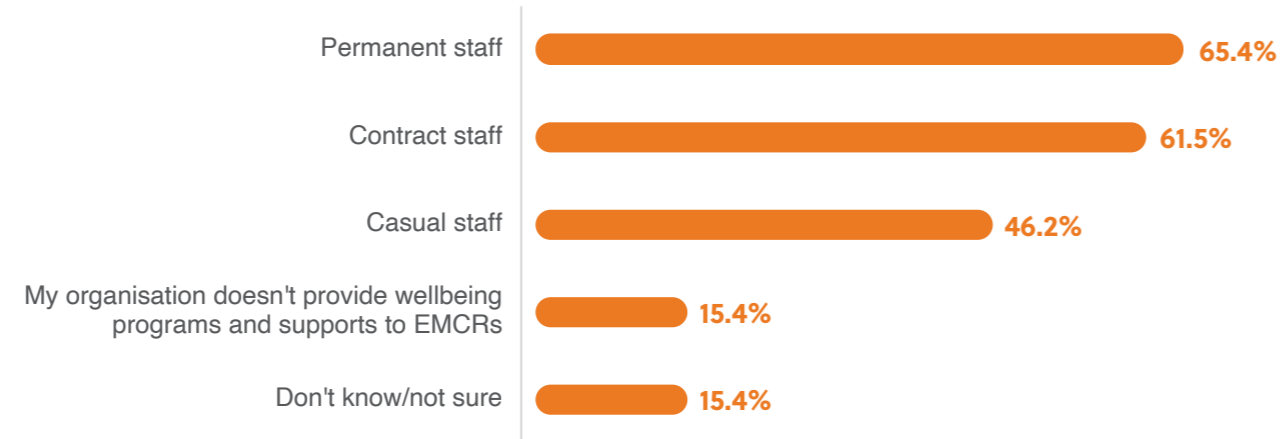
In the last decade, many employers have recognised the importance of employee wellbeing to their workplaces and are investing in programs to support employees to address both work related and personal issues. We were keen to understand the availability of these programs to EMCRs.

Around two thirds of respondents reported wellbeing programs and support were provided to EMCRs who are permanent (65.4%) and contract staff (61.5%), falling to less than half for casual staff (46.2%). 15.4% reported no support provided, and a further 15.4% didn't know or weren't sure.



Around two thirds of respondents reported **wellbeing programs** and support were provided to EMCRs who are permanent and contract staff

My organisation provides wellbeing programs and supports to EMCRs who are:



'There is an EAP program available to all staff. No specific EMCR targeting outside of what is available to everyone. Several units have EMCR committees that also perform this service by delivering wellbeing seminars, get togethers, etc.'

'We have well being weeks where we are encouraged to minimise meetings and look after ourselves. ...From a well being perspective I feel the university really supports its staff (in comparison to hospital!).'

'EAP programs provide 3 counselling sessions per year.'

'Employee Assistance Program is the only program I am aware of; all psychology clinics in this program are on the other side of town and require time off to visit.'



Image: La Trobe University

FELLOWSHIPS

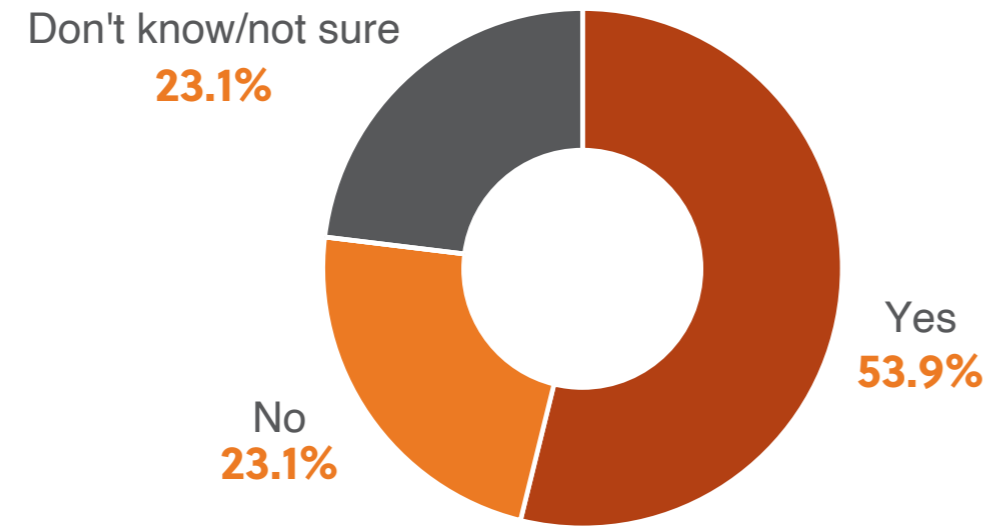
Fellowships are an important source of career support for EMCRs, enabling them to establish themselves as independent researchers.

Fellowship application support

Fellowship awards are typically fiercely competitive, and one practical way an organisation can support its EMCRs is by assisting them with their Fellowship applications.

Just over half (53.9%) reported receiving assistance from outside their own team with applications; a quarter (23.1%) reported there was no assistance provided and a further quarter (23.1%) didn't know.

Does your organisation provide robust reviews and feedback on Fellowship applications (other than from supervisors or colleagues from the same research team)?



'Yes we have some local review and feedback sessions, as well as (university level) reviews and feedback. I was a near miss for the investigator grant so they provided me with additional feedback as well after the results of investigator grants were released.'

'Grant reviewing provided but largely for only the top applicants from the uni for investigator grants and not often available for EMCRs (goes to the ones most likely to get up with their application)'

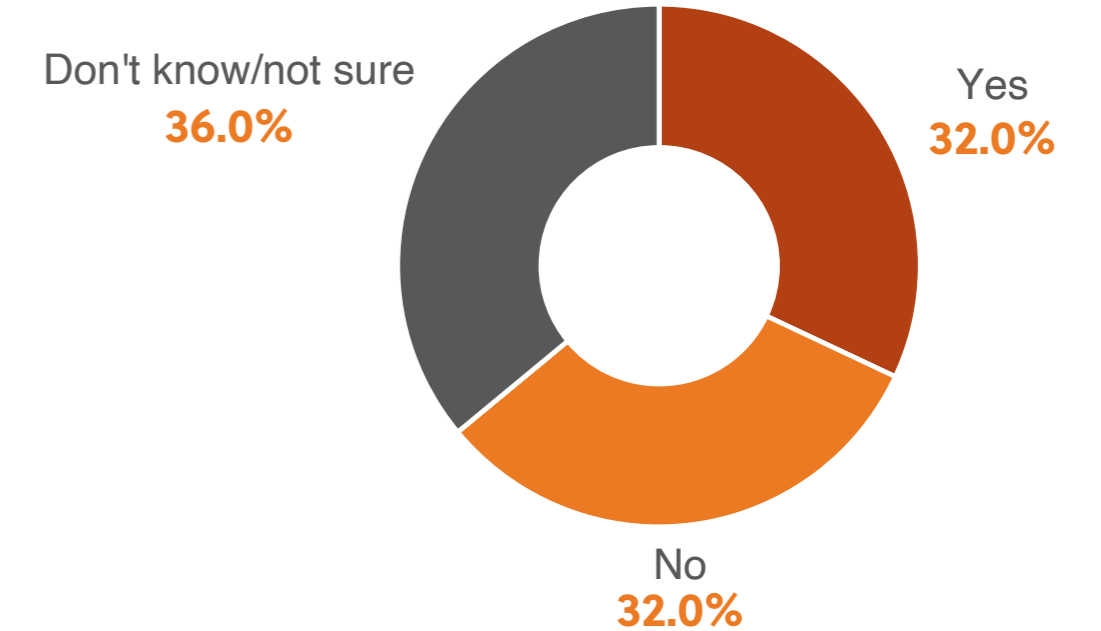
'Grants team will review applications prior to submission and provide excellent feedback.'

Salary Gaps

While they provide salary support, a fellowship may not provide the full cost of a salary, which can leave a salary gap. Typically, funding this salary gap falls back on the researcher's employer. We wanted to know to what extent salary gap funding was provided for EMCRs who received research fellowships.

Responses were relatively evenly split, with approximately one third reporting salary gap funding was provided (32%), the same proportion reporting it wasn't, and the remainder (36%) unsure.

Does your organisation provide salary gap funding for Fellowships?



32% reported salary gap funding was provided

'Fellowship Gap Central funding is available to provide salary support for Fellowships awarded through Australian competitive grant schemes and Fellowships funded from other sources to be agreed by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) on a case-by-case basis.'

'Not for all fellowships, only for NHMRC and ARC. They won't do this for Heart Foundation or cancer institute or any other industry fellowship.'

PROMOTION AND RECRUITMENT

In many organisations, a key assessment element for staff with responsibility for managing staff is how well they manage and support their team members.

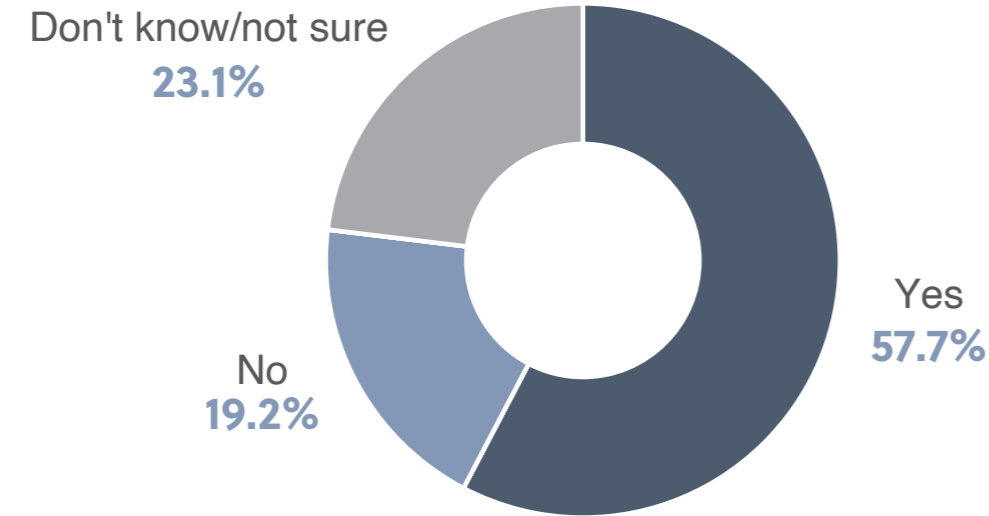
Do they provide opportunities for their staff to gain experience and develop? Many team leaders in research have risen to their position because of the quality of their research rather than their ability to lead. We wanted to know what emphasis research organisations placed on the ability to lead and develop others when evaluating and promoting staff.

57.7% of respondents reported that appraisal and promotion criteria included the individual's performance in supervising and/or supporting their staff. One in 5 (19.2%) reported these criteria weren't included, and the remainder (23.1%) didn't know.



One in 5 reported these criteria weren't included, and the remainder (23.1%) didn't know.

Does your organisation's appraisal/promotion criteria for staff who supervise researchers include criteria relating to supervision and/or support of the researchers under their supervision?



'Not strongly enough. There is still not enough incentive for this to be done. Supervising students, yes, but not EMCRs.'

'At the level of Senior Lecturer ... Emerging evidence of successful mentoring of junior staff and/or research students' C to D "At the level of Associate Professor ... Mentoring of junior colleagues and collegiality to enhance the research environment in the department/school are expected... Successfully mentoring junior staff career advancement...'

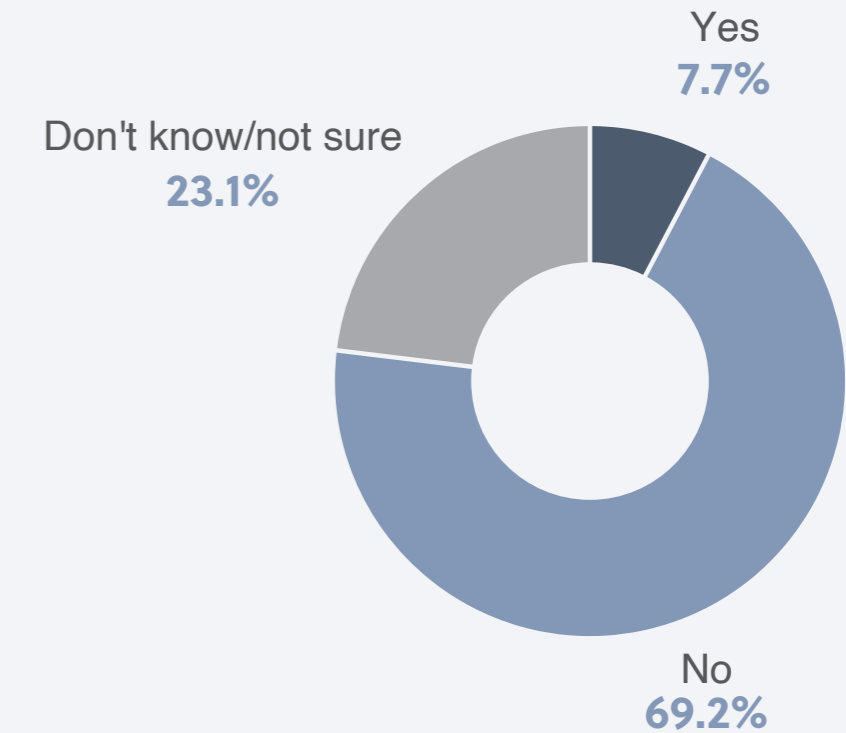
'Criteria for promotion include criteria on how the individual has contributed to team leadership.'

Promotion and recruitment panels

One way of evaluating management and supervision skills and capability is to include EMCRs in promotion and recruitment panels for senior staff. Doing so also provides EMCRs with exposure to their organisation's processes and valuable experience participating in recruitment and promotion processes.

Only 7.7% reported EMCR participation in panels. Seven in 10 (69.2%) reported there was no participation, and nearly one quarter weren't sure.

Are EMCRs included in promotion/recruitment panels for senior staff?



'mentoring program for women at levels A-C to support career progression (includes executive and peer level mentoring support)'

'There is a specific leadership initiative for women (at least on my site) to provide mentorship.'

'Not sure if available to casual staff but specific mentoring is available for women applying for academic promotion.'

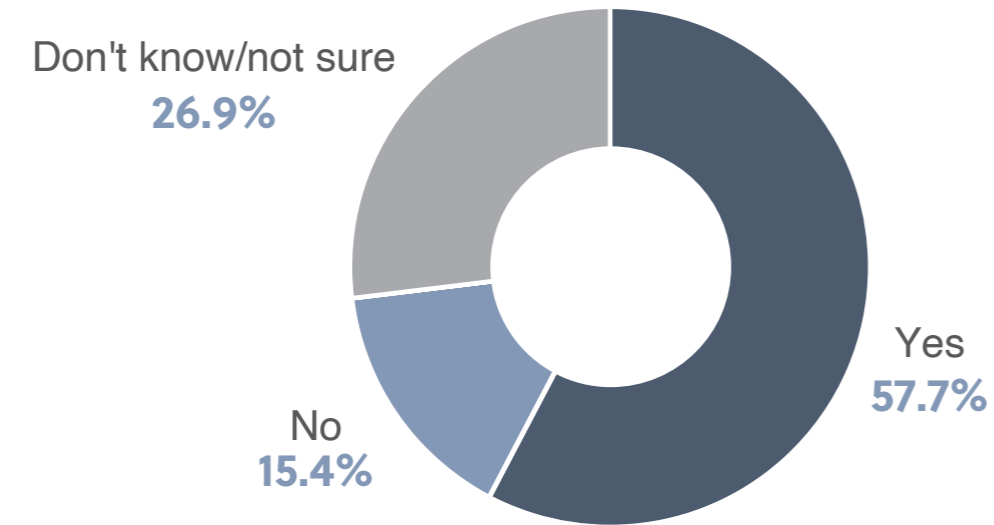
DECISION MAKING AND GOVERNANCE

Traditionally, decision making and governance are the purview of an organisation's most senior levels of staff and their governing body.

One way to ensure the perspectives of EMCRs is included in decision making is to involve EMCRs in key decision making committees around research (examples of decision needed here) or governance (e.g. organisational strategy and policies).

Over half of respondents (57.7%) reported that EMCR representatives are included in key research decision making committees; 15.4% reported they weren't and the remainder, more than a quarter (26.9%) didn't know.

Does your organisation include EMCR representatives on key research decision making committees?



'A mix....at school level no, at some uni wide committees yes but not all

'(The University's) Research Committees and Research grant Panels all have EMCR representatives. ... (EMCRs) have been offered opportunities to sit on (university) Research Award and Grant panels, Selection panels for external funding bodies, to join the Health Research and Innovation Advisory Forum hosted by the Pro Vice-Chancellor Health and Medical Research.'

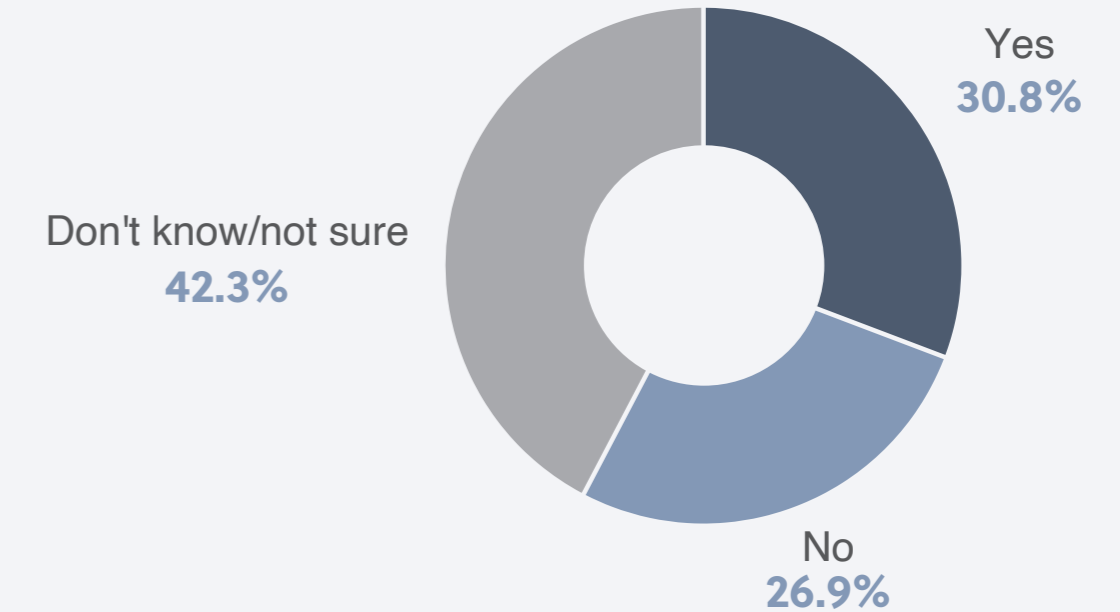
'(There is an) EMCR representative on Faculty Research Committee.'



Over half of respondents reported that EMCR representatives are included in key research decision making committees

When it comes to governance bodies responsible for policy and strategy, reported levels of participation are lower, with less than a third (30.8%) reporting EMCR representation.

Does your organisation include EMCR representatives on key governance committees (e.g around policy setting)?



CONCLUSION

It is clear from the survey that there are measures to support EMCRs' well being and their career progression, with the survey identifying a wide range of policies and initiatives in place in many workplaces.

Unsurprisingly, there is significant variation in the programs and support offered by different organisations. Information about opportunities can be difficult to find and access to programs is restricted by limited funding in some cases.

One participant in our survey had this to say:

'EMCRs are just used as a work horse, not supported and mentored enough to grow, yet expected to somehow apply for and get grants. They can't work on developing their program of research whilst working on other people's grants because that's what pays the salary...'

Fortunately, their experience is far from universal, and the following quote is probably a better reflection of the average experience:

'There are piecemeal bits of work across the uni that are supporting EMCRs well but this is not coordinated and consistent across the entire organisation'

One objective of this survey is to highlight the programs that are available, to encourage organisations to broaden the range of opportunities they provide, and to encourage EMCRs to ask 'Does my organisation do that?'

We thought it was important to ask EMCRs rather than institutions' administration teams, and we recognise that programs might actually exist at some organisations but the respondents don't know about them. But if people don't know about them that is a problem.

Ideally the full suite of measures covered in this report would be available to every EMCR. This report provides an opportunity for all research organisations to work with their senior staff, EMCRs and support staff to identify where the gaps are in their own organisations.

Awareness of practices and initiatives that can improve research culture is not the primary barrier to improving research culture; significant work has already been done to identify the issues and raise awareness. The key problem is implementing the measures needed to improve the culture. Contributing factors are the historically insufficient priority given to these measures by research funding bodies, research institutions and research leaders; and the inadequate resources committed by research funding bodies and research institutions to funding these activities.

These factors of insufficient priority and under resourcing are currently preventing the sector wide, comprehensive and routine adoption of these measures. While research institutions and research leaders have an essential role to play, if it is left to individual institutions to implement on their own, there will, at best, be isolated improvements and islands of excellence, rather than system wide improvement.

We believe there are other organisations that must also participate if we are to succeed. This includes Research Australia. The NHMRC has also participated in this endeavour, most recently through the development of the draft Good Institutional Practice Guide, and further involvement by the NHMRC and other research funding bodies is going to be essential if we are to achieve sector-wide improvements.

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