Best Practices for Supporting Early Career Academics (ECAs)

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Induction:

- **Academic-specific induction**: Many ECAs do not find induction sessions to be useful, finding the information too general or shallow. When starting, ECAs are looking to get into their work as quickly as possible and things that take them away from their work must be particularly valuable or they are seen as wasteful and an annoyance. Inductions that include general staff were highlighted as being particularly inadequate.
    - Academic staff should receive specialised induction, specially designed to provide them with practical information.
    - Personalising induction at the academic unit level can be a useful way to orient ECAs to their work environment. (However, someone in the academic unit must be willing to take this task on.)
- **Amount of information:** ECAs can find induction sessions overwhelming if the intent is to provide all the information they will need for their job.
    - Induction sessions should be realistic about how much information academics can retain and what is the most important information for new academics to know.
- **Induction timing**: ECAs find inductions that are at the wrong point in time to be a waste. Induction sessions should be aimed at providing information that is of immediate use. ECAs found it particularly frustrating going to induction sessions aimed at new employees once they'd been at the university for a while. ECAs also may not remember information presented too early.
    - Induction sessions should provide information aimed at new academics' more immediate information needs.
- **Induction documents**: ECAs rarely view induction documents as being a valuable source of information and rarely use them. Induction documents are often written about academics' roles, responsibilities, and how the university works, with emphasis on policies, procedures, and how to demonstrate accountability and compliance. Documents are often written by HR and about ticking boxes to demonstrate they have attended required induction. ECAs can get overwhelmed by the number of documents provided during induction and the time it would take to familiarise themselves with those documents. They are also skeptical about whether the documents provide information about how things are actually done "on the ground."

- o Documents provided should be for ECAs' immediate needs – information that will aid them in accomplishing the work that is currently before them (research, teaching, setting themselves up for their job, etc.).
- **Centrally-located information:** Some ECAs found it difficult to locate university information as it is often scattered throughout the university webpages.
  - o One university had recently put together an orientation program and accompanying website, which was a "one-stop shop" for all information necessary for new academics (e.g., parking information, IT access, university policies and procedures). While this didn't solve issues like information overload, it made finding information easier and was appreciated by new academics.
- **Preparedness**: Departments are frequently not prepared for academics when they arrive. Often there is lack of clarity about what to do or where to go on the first day. This problem can be made worse if academics start in the summer when colleagues are on holiday. ECAs form poor opinions of departments that are not prepared for them and are frustrated about not being able to start work.
  - o Departments should clarify with new academics when they are starting and ensure that there is someone there to help them through initial stages of getting themselves set up.

Supports:

- **Access:** ECAs must have access to the resources they require to do their job. This sounds apparent, but it frequently does not happen. ECAs have a great deal of frustration over lost time to work.
  - o ECAs must have access to the required office space, the equipment (e.g., computer, internet, phone, printer), and university information systems (e.g., university email, VLE, financial management system).
  - o Access to the required resources should be arranged before ECAs' start date.
  - o It should be made clear what resources are provided and what are not.
- **Collegial relationships:** Many ECAs' colleagues become mentors and friends. Social aspects of departmental life are important for many ECAs, providing support, career opportunities, and socialisation into academia.
  - o A collegial atmosphere should be encouraged in the academic unit. Collegiality can be encouraged by providing social space (e.g. a lunchroom), and social activities (e.g. going for tea/coffee/beers).
  - o ECAs' offices must be located physically close to their colleagues. Close physical proximity can support socialisation within the department and promote feelings of social inclusion. Additionally, because ECAs have so many questions, close physical proximity allows ECAs to ask questions informally. ECAs may be hesitant to use email or arrange formal meetings to ask questions, particularly if they are minor. Informally asking colleagues is a major way ECAs find the day-to-day information to do their jobs.

- **A go-to academic in the department**: ECAs typically do not have information about university or department specific policies and procedures, or how those procedures and interpreted and implemented within their academic unit (e.g., how to enter marks, how marking are practically implemented). ECAs are often overwhelmed by the amount of policy and procedural information written by universities. Practical information about interpreting and implementing university information is typically written down. ECAs do not go to university documents when they need information, preferring to get information from people. Colleagues typically provide the tacit information required to complete academic work.
    - ECAs appreciate having someone more senior to them to whom they can go with the myriad of questions they have – a go-to person. This person should be happy to take on the role and, ideally, be in the same department. It is very important that this person is physically located close by.
- **Administrative support:** ECAs lack knowledge about many of the practical aspects of their jobs (e.g., photocopier codes, where the stationary is, how to get a computer, how to use financial management systems to get reimbursed) and often do not know who to turn to for help. ECAs spend a lot of time on these activities, feeling frustrated and, at times, lost.
    - ECAs need to be introduced to the administrative assistants in the academic unit and instructed about who is responsible for different administrative areas.
    - It needs to be made clear how much administrative support ECAs will receive – which tasks they are expected to do on their own and which they can get help.
- **Bureaucratic advocate:** ECAs find university bureaucracies and bureaucratic aspects of their jobs challenging and frustrating, often running into issues dealing with the bureaucracy (e.g., reimbursement claims being rejected, inability to access university information systems, extraneous requests for documentation). These issues require time, energy, persistence, institutional knowledge, and, at time, institutional power to resolve. Many spend a lot of time and mental energy on bureaucratic tasks, which are viewed by some to be extraneous to their jobs.
    - ECAs need to have someone senior in the department they can go to with these issues who will help them through these issues until they are resolved.
    - ECAs may or may not have a clear sense of what level of bureaucracy is an expected part of the job and when there are issues that need to be resolved. Expectations should be made clear.
- **Dedicated research staff:** ECAs are concerned about establishing their research programs and getting grants. Some ECAs are new to applying for funding or new to applying for funding in their new context.
    - Many ECAs appreciate having dedicated staff members (for example in the Research Office or similar unit) who specialise in grants and whose job it is to help academics with their applications.

Willson, R. (2016). *Information in transition: Examining the information behaviour of academics as they transition into university careers.* (Doctoral thesis, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia). Retrieved from https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/9316538