

Report on outcomes from Gender Institute grant to JCS Equity and Diversity Committee: writing workshops for female EMCRs in the Joint Colleges of Science

Introduction

We applied for this grant because writing is increasingly important for success in science. Grant and fellowship applications need to be clear for non-expert grant panel members or reviewers and papers may also be refereed by those outside the immediate area. However, many EMCRs struggle with writing and this can impact on their careers. Attrition of females from the academic workforce in science becomes significant at Levels B and C, often the time where academics are transitioning from a postdoc supported by a group leader to an independent position or fellowship. Establishing their independence requires them to have a strong publication and grants track record – both of these are dependent on writing skills to translate research achievements into a demonstrable track record. By providing women at this career stage with strategies that help them prioritise writing, improved skills in writing and editing, as well as practical help on a current project, we aimed to improve their competitiveness through this transition.

We proposed to help female EMCRs overcome these problems by providing linked writing and editing workshops run by a qualified editor and writing coach. The workshops meet a clear need not covered elsewhere; grant advice sessions focus on strategy rather than writing while writing support is currently offered to HDR students but not EMCRs. Participants were expected to bring a current writing project with them so that they benefit through immediate practical help as well as the development of better strategies to plan and execute writing.

Workshop details

Title: Writing workshops for female EMCRs

Dates: Full day workshop on 29 November 2018 on writing and motivation followed by half day workshop on 5 December 2018 on editing.

Facilitator: Dr Malini Devadas (<http://mdwritingediting.com.au/>) did her undergraduate degree at ANU before completing her PhD in 1997. In 2003, she worked at the ANU's National Institute of Health and Human Sciences across seven research schools and departments. Malini is also familiar with ARC and NHMRC requirements, having worked at the ARC in 2002 and having edited numerous grant applications over many years working as a professional editor. She is sought after as a writing coach and has been giving acclaimed writing workshops at universities around Australia since 2011. An additional advantage was that Malini is a female role model for developing a successful science-related career outside academia.

Impact

Participants: The workshops were offered to female academics at Levels A, B and C. After an email advertisement sent to the JCS mailing list, we received 50 applications, including some from Level D academics and postgraduate students, for 30 places. Places were offered to 32 applicants (in the expectation that some may not be able to attend), 16 from CHM and 16 from CoS. All 32 attended the first workshop but some participants were not able to attend the second.

Outcomes: There was an enthusiastic response to the workshops, with participants finding them useful, both for developing writing and editing strategies and as a place to share concerns about workload and careers. Some also mentioned that hearing from other women about their experiences was useful. Comments received included:

- Thank you, great workshop!
- Great presenter!
- The second workshop was excellent and practical.
- The structured, objective approach to writing was extremely helpful.
- The examples and support given to enable writing in difficult circumstances was excellent.
- I really found this workshop useful, thank you!

Participants were asked how they will change their practice as a result of this workshop. Answers included:

- I hope to completely change how I approach my writing, by setting up a plan and structure and by editing effectively.
- Allocate time for writing and be stricter about research time (scheduling)
- Be more systematic in my editing.
- Set specific time for writing.
- I hope to better plan and brainstorm before beginning to write a manuscript.
- Practising more and editing other people's work.
- Have a calendar that is more realistic.

Most participants signed up to receive further information on the Gender Institute. It was evident from the workshops that many women perceived gendered expectations to tasks and responsibilities in their areas, leading to a fruitful discussion on recognizing and responding to such issues. The feedback confirms that these workshops are fulfilling an unmet need and are useful to participants. Suggestions for improvement from participants has been taken on board in planning the 2019 workshops.