



## Energy Consumers Australia – Gill Owen Scholarship

Dr Gill Owen was an inaugural Director of the Energy Consumers Australia Board. Gill Owen was a respected policy advocate, who brought her considerable expertise and insights to energy consumer issues in both Australia and the UK.

Reflecting her international experience, Gill Owen provided a unique perspective on Australian policy and program development, supported by her enduring commitment to social justice and better consumer outcomes. Her contribution saw improvements to the Australian regulatory framework, including in the creation of the Australian Energy Regulator's Consumer Challenge Panel. She was a guiding voice in the establishment of Energy Consumers Australia, and our early days as an organisation.

Gill Owen passed away in August 2016. To honour Gill Owen's memory Energy Consumers Australia has created an annual scholarship in her name.

The **Gill Owen Scholarship** supports an individual to travel internationally to research innovative ideas and initiatives that will be relevant to improving outcomes for consumers in the Australian energy market.

Applications for the **2020 Gill Owen Scholarship** are open and will close on 8 November 2019.

### Background

Australian households and small businesses have faced energy prices that have doubled over the last ten years. Their level of trust in the energy market is low. Consumers are not confident they have the information or tools to make choices about energy offers or their use, and they often struggle to find a trusted voice to give them accurate advice that aligns with the way they and their families live.

Digital technologies potentially offer a low-cost solutions for providing insights into our energy use and costs. The technology is becoming available that allows us to track our bills, as well as monitor and control individual appliances, through our smartphone. New services are emerging that can help us decide when is the best time to use appliances; do we put on the dishwasher overnight, or – if we have solar panels on the roof – in the afternoon? We should also be able to access energy deals that do that thinking for us – whether it's using energy when it's cheapest, or giving authority to third parties, to work out and advise what's in our best interest.

As these opportunities become available in the Australian energy market they could be accompanied by a new set of challenges.

Governments globally are grappling with how to give consumers control over how their data is used. In Australia, the development of a Consumer Data Right could help consumers access and transfer their information. This initiative should make it easier for consumers to compare and switch products and services and give competition in the National Energy Market a much-needed boost.

Energy remains an essential service so access and affordability remain key concerns, including for those who do not choose, or are unable, to engage digitally. But the current regulatory framework may impede the delivery of these new solutions, or inadvertently preference incumbent energy companies. Vulnerable consumers are at particular risk – not just from rising prices, but also from being left behind as new technologies change the way we use and track energy.



## **About the Scholarship**

Energy Consumers Australia sees great potential value in continuing that exchange of ideas and experience that Gill Owen exemplified.

Applications are invited for a grant of up to \$15,000 to research innovation, policies and programs that will be relevant to achieving improved consumer outcomes in a dynamic and changing Australian energy market.

Examples of such innovation internationally include:

- policy initiatives, such as the US Green Button<sup>1</sup> scheme – an industry-led initiative that helps consumers access their information and provide it to others;
- alternative approaches to market regulation, such as the UK Competition and Market Authority's work on digital comparison tools<sup>2</sup>, or lessons from the UK smart meter rollout;
- how research is informing policy and regulation – for example, how relevant learnings from the European Union's Empowering partnership<sup>3</sup> on consumer behaviour and bills is helping define best practice.

## ***Activities supported through the Scholarship***

The Gill Owen scholar will engage with leading thinkers in other countries and report on new insights and knowledge to apply to problems faced by small energy consumers in Australia. The range of overseas activities would typically encompass:

- visits to one or more countries to learn from energy consumer activities and experiences. (Given the resources available, you would have to provide a persuasive rationale for more than one country);
- meetings with relevant individuals and organisations in the selected country; and
- speaking engagements at conferences and similar events.

Energy Consumers Australia could suggest potential contacts from its network and will provide a letter of introduction.

The range of activities that must be undertaken after the return to Australia include:

- producing a clear written report to (of at least 2000 words) communicate the learnings from the visit and meetings overseas, and their relevance for Australia;
- meetings with consumer groups, energy companies, and government officials to promulgate what has been learnt
- speaking engagements - including at the ECA's annual Foresighting Forum and at least one other public event organised by Energy Consumers Australia or others.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.greenbuttondata.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-comparison-tools-summary-of-final-report/digital-comparison-tools-summary-of-final-report>

<sup>3</sup> <http://iee-empowering.eu/en/about/>



### **Who can apply**

Successful applicants should be able to demonstrate most of the following attributes.

1. Australian citizens or permanent residents at least 18 years of age
2. Experience in evidence-based research or advocacy relating to energy consumer issues
3. Good knowledge of the key issues in the Australian energy market that drive energy consumer outcomes
4. Good networking and communication skills to meet people, including senior officials and academics in your chosen country(ies)
5. Good writing and presentation skills.

### **How to apply**

Applicants should submit an application providing the information described in the Application Guide, including the following:

- What is the problem for Australian energy consumers you want to investigate? Why now?
- How will your research and international insights help address that issue?
- How will your project be influential for the long-term interests of small energy consumers? Will particular groups of consumer benefit?
- Who will you engage with to develop insights and knowledge about what should be done?
- What are your skills and experience that will make your project successful?
- What is your proposed budget (including any other funding)?

**Applications for the 2019 Gill Owen Scholarship will close on Friday 8 November 2019. The successful applicant will be announced at the Energy Consumers Australia Foresighting Forum on 19-20 February 2020.**