



**Australian Government**

**National Health and Medical Research Council**

## Fostering research collaborations in NHMRC's new grant program

### Collaboration in the new grant program

NHMRC's new grant program has been designed to foster collaborations. It provides flexible longer term funding and encourages programmatic research involving collaborations that evolve organically as research opportunities arise.

Researchers can undertake traditional large scale collaborations with peers as Chief Investigators (CIs) on grants. Grantees can also include collaborators as Associate Investigators (AIs) on a grant, without them being affected by the capping of applications or grants held, where specific and smaller scale research collaboration is required. Research funding can be used to procure the AI's specialist research services, if necessary.

Researchers can flexibly collaborate with a wide range of groups that are not specifically named on a grant. NHMRC research support packages can be spent on salaries for research support personnel and other direct costs of research based on the objectives of the research activity. This can include contracting specialist expertise/services from researchers, such as post-doctoral scientists, to conduct specific projects.

NHMRC's new track record assessment framework also fosters collaboration through a focus on research outcomes and outputs, rather than inputs such as being named on a research grant. It is thus no longer advantageous for NHMRC's application assessment to be listed as a CI on a grant. Applicants are assessed based on outputs such as research publications, research impact and research leadership, including collaborative research program and team leadership, professional leadership and research mentoring.

Further guidance on collaborations fostered in the context of new grant schemes is below. Guidance on use of NHMRC research funding is provided in [NHMRC's Direct Research Cost Guidelines](#).

#### *Investigator Grants*

Investigator Grants provide a highly flexible research support package which allows CIs to collaborate with whomever they wish, to achieve the aims of their research program. This flexibility will allow collaborations to be formed as the program of research progresses, rather than be required to list collaborators as CIs or AIs in the application.

#### *Synergy Grants*

Collaboration is central to the objectives of Synergy Grants. Synergy Grantees are required to form multidisciplinary and diverse teams (which can include collaborations with Associate Investigators) aligned to the major research question.

#### *Ideas Grants*

Reflecting the value of collaboration in developing innovative and creative ideas, the assessment of the feasibility of an Ideas Grant application will include the expertise of the researcher(s), including any AIs.

#### *Strategic and Leveraging Grants*

Collaboration will continue to be supported in the numerous schemes under the Strategic and Leveraging stream. For example, objectives of the Centres of Research Excellence scheme include *'foster and build capacity in the health and medical research workforce'* and *'provide opportunities to expand and improve collaborations between research teams'*.

### Current collaboration trends

Under the new grant program, CIs may hold a maximum of two grants concurrently from the Investigator, Synergy and Ideas Grant schemes with the following exceptions:

- CIs who hold two Ideas Grants may hold a Synergy Grant, and
- CIs who hold two Ideas Grants may apply for and hold an Investigator Grant<sup>1</sup>.

It provides an opportunity for teams to draw support from an Investigator or Ideas Grant and concurrently receive the 'collaboration bonus' of a Synergy Grant.

This policy is intended to help reduce the burden of large numbers of unfunded applications on the health and medical research sector and evidence indicates that it is likely to have minimal impact on collaboration. Currently, the majority of Project Grant CIs (84%) hold only one or two Project Grants – essentially the same as will be enforced under the new grant program's capping policies. The table below shows the number and percentage of CIs listed on one to six Project Grants active in 2016.

| Number of active Project Grants held as a CI | Number of CIs | Percentage |
|--|---------------|------------|
| 1  | 2920          | 64.5       |
| 2  | 896           | 19.8       |
| 3  | 442           | 9.8        |
| 4  | 197           | 4.4        |
| 5  | 51            | 1.1        |
| 6  | 19            | 0.4        |

These data also indicate that very few 'rare specialists' (such as bioinformaticians, statisticians and health economists), who are in high demand due to the scarcity of their skills, have maximised the number of Project Grants they can hold as a CI (i.e. only 0.04% of rare specialists were CIs on 6 Project Grants). This means that new grant program capping policies will not have a disproportionate impact on rare specialists.

Under the new grant program, rare specialists may:

- be listed as a CI and receive a salary and/or funding for Direct Research Costs<sup>2</sup>,
- be listed as an AI and receive funding for Direct Research Costs (but not salary), or
- not be named formally as a CI or AI, but may contract their services and be paid through the CI's Direct Research Costs.

<sup>1</sup> If both the Ideas and Investigator Grant applications are successful, only the Investigator Grant will be offered.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants-funding/administering-grants/nhmrc-funding-agreement-and-deeds-agreement>