



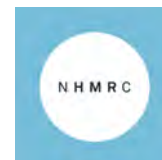
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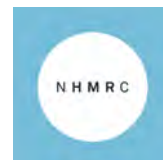
Investigator Grants 2023 peer reviewer webinar

Transcript of webinar and Q&A

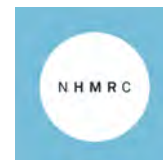


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1. Facilitator welcome

Dr Julie Glover (Executive Director, Research Foundations, NHMRC):

Welcome, everyone. And a big welcome to you to this 2023 Investigator Grant Peer review briefing. So, I'd like to begin to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting in Canberra. And to acknowledge all of the other traditional lands that you are joining from. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are attending the meeting today. Thank you all for the very important roles that you are undertaking and the contributions that you are making to NHMRC's peer review, and also for taking the time out to listen to our peer review briefing today and contribute to questions. And for those of you who are listening later online, thank you for taking the time as well.

My name is Julie Glover. I'm one of the Executive Directors here at NHMRC, and one of my roles is to manage the Investigator Grants Peer review process, and I'll be facilitating our discussion today. I'm joined here in our Canberra office by our CEO, Professor Anne Kelso, who will be doing the majority of the speaking; speaking to you about your roles as peer reviewers. I'm also very pleased that we've got some very experienced peer reviewers who are joining us here today and some of those who are here in their role as a peer review mentor. Which we will be talking on a little bit about that later and we will advise on who the peer review mentors are for this round.

We also have some community observers joining us, and I wanted to say a special thank you to them and thank them for their really important role in advising us on our peer review processes. Anne is going to present to us the key peer review considerations.

Then we'll have a chance for people to ask questions. So, you can either send your questions through in the chat, in the Zoom chat, or you can also use the hand up function to ask them directly if you would like. If we don't get to all of the questions, please don't be too concerned. We'll make sure that we address them in material that comes out to you after this briefing. And lastly, I just wanted to let you know that this webinar is being recorded and the first part of the webinar will be recorded so that we can put it up online for other peer reviewers to hear who weren't able to attend today.

The questions part of the webinar will also be recorded, but that's just for our own internal use. We didn't want that to constrain you asking your questions. What we'll do with that material is we will summarise the questions that are asked and our responses, as well as adding any supplementary material we think might be helpful and we'll make that available to all peer reviewers after the meeting as well. So right now, I'll hand over to Anne, who will run us through the presentation and then we can have time for questions at the end. Thank you.



2. CEO peer reviewer briefing

Professor Anne Kelso AO (CEO, NHMRC):

Thanks, Julie, and good morning, everyone, wherever you are around the country. Really appreciate you joining us for this briefing today and particularly for the discussion that will have after I've run through a few slides. I also want to add my thanks for your undertaking of this work. It's a huge task. It's a really important task. We know that it is something that takes a lot of time and a lot of energy. And of course, we're completely dependent on the peer reviewers who help us with this scheme. So, I just do want to express my absolute appreciation for the work that you have agreed to do with us. Now, I'm going to run through a few slides that go through aspects of the scheme and some advice for peer reviewers, and some of this will be quite quick.

But I think there may well be issues that come up during the slides and I hope we'll have plenty of time during the Q&A to address any of those all later. As Julie has just described, I also know that in a group like this we'll have some people who've done a lot of peer review in the past and others who are relatively new to the peer review process for NHMRC. And so, you'll all have different questions and experiences of peer review. But I think it's really great for us to see that you're willing to come and hear where we're at with peer review today and what we're hoping that you'll be able to do with us.

Slide 2 – Overview (4min 25sec):

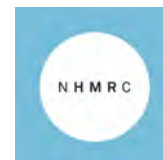
So, the first slide is just to run through very briefly, so this is just a brief list of the things that we're going to cover in this presentation. And so, you can see it's quite extensive. And so, I'll run through each of these points as we go along. And I'll also try to highlight any changes that have been made in the last couple of years. So, if you haven't reviewed for us in the last year or so, there may be things here that are completely new to you. And again, I'm very happy to talk about them some more during the Q&A.

Slide 3 – NHMRC's grant program overview (4min 56sec):

So first of all, really, just as a way of background about NHMRC's grant program, and most people, of course, will be broadly familiar with what we are here to do, but I think it's always useful to start by remembering that the purpose of NHMRC funding is to improve the health of the Australian community. But we take a really broad view of that. That doesn't mean that every grant application has to be immediately about addressing a community or a specific health issue.

We understand that the research we need to support ranges across a very broad spectrum from the most basic discovery research through to clinical research, population health research and improvement in health services. So, we do take a very broad view, but we are always looking for research that in the short, medium, or long term will improve the health of the Australian community. So, our purpose is to fund the highest quality of health and medical research and the best researchers to do that work and to create a very broad base of knowledge and research capability for the country.

So then when we come to the Investigator Grant scheme, you'll be aware this is a very important scheme within that overall grant program. It's a large scheme. It's about 40% of the funding that we disperse each year and it's focused on support for outstanding investigators and their teams.



And as you'll know, it's got five career stages. So, it's seeking to support people from quite soon after the completion of their PhD all the way through to the most senior researchers. We did something very important a few years ago, I think, when we created this scheme, and that was to consolidate the support for the salary and the team into a single package. And so, the grants provide a salary to those who need it.

And of course, there are plenty of people in our community who have a salary from their university or their institutes, so they don't need a salary from NHMRC. But everybody with an Investigator Grant receives a research support package, the size of which depends on their career stage. And by providing a single five-year grant like this as a package, then what we're seeking to do is provide investigators with absolute flexibility to do the best research they can to pursue new and innovative research directions.

Slide 4 – Peer review principles (7min 18sec):

So, when we think about peer review for all of our schemes, we are looking to address the broad peer review principles that are outlined here. The process should be fair for everybody. They should be transparent so that as much as possible is understood about the application process and the peer review process. While of course protecting confidentiality, it should be independent, it should be appropriate and balanced, it should involve community participation. And as Julie has mentioned, we have community observers participating today and overseeing the whole process for NHMRC, and that's an incredibly important part of the process.

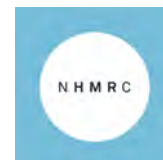
Confidentiality, I'll say a little bit more about [later in the presentation]. It should be impartial and of course we're looking for the highest quality and excellence of peer reviews.

Slide 5 – Peer review is important (8min 7sec):

Now, peer review is incredibly important. I mean, obviously all the decisions we make about what to fund depends on the work that you do as peer reviewers. We absolutely depend on the scores that you provide and the feedback that you provide that underpins those scores. So that means for each scheme, it's really critical that the scores are made in reference to the category descriptors for that scheme and the assessment criteria for that scheme. So, look carefully at them for Investigator Grants when you're undertaking peer review for this scheme.

I think we also, all of us who are involved at any level in this process need to remember how much effort applicants put into preparing their applications. I think any of us who's ever prepared a grant application knows how much work this is, and particularly for people who are seeking to find their own salary and their support for the team. This is really a very, very critical piece of work.

So that means as a peer reviewer you have a responsibility to give each assessment the due care and attention that you'd want given to your own application and to provide constructive feedback. And we at NHMRC will always do our best to respect the enormous effort that applicants put into their applications as well as the effort that you as peer reviewers provide. And again, perhaps particularly in the case of this very big and important scheme, we know that the outcomes of the Investigator Grant applications will have a significant impact on most, if not all, of the researchers who receive the grants as a result of the peer review process.



Slide 6 – Disclosure of interests and confidentiality (9min 43sec):

So, peer review is important and again, we're just very grateful for you undertaking this critical task and wanted to say a little bit more about confidentiality and also about disclosure of interests, disclosing interests that you might have relevant to the grant applications that you review is really critically important and don't think that you should have no interests.

I imagine that just about everybody, maybe everybody who's involved in peer review for this scheme, has some kind of connection with NHMRC already, and that means that you will have collaborators in institutions around the country, you'll have friends in institutions around the country. So, it's completely normal that anybody who's involved in peer review will have some interests. And so, what's important is to declare those, if they're in anyway relevant to the applications that you're asked to review.

It may be that you will realise after you've agreed to assess an application that you have a conflict of interest or a potential conflict of interest. And then it's critically important that you get in touch with the Secretariat to advise that, and alternative arrangements can be made if that conflict of interest is too great to allow you to review the grant. So, the main thing is just to be open with us about that so that we can have the fairest possible peer review process for applicants and everybody across the scheme. That's a legal obligation, but obviously it's a matter of fair treatment of applicants as well.

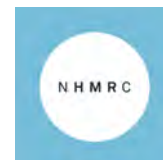
Confidentiality is also a legal obligation under the Privacy Act, and it's also just the right thing to do. We want to respect the privacy of information that's provided through applications and also the confidentiality of people's research ideas and the potential intellectual property that they might be presenting in their applications as well as any other personal information that might be provided. So that's enforced through a document that used to be called a Deed of confidentiality. It's now called NHMRC obligations in relation to confidential information. It's a pity we have to use more words to say the same thing, but it means the same thing.

It is a lifetime commitment. So once the peer review process is over, it doesn't mean you can now talk about what you've read in the applications, though you must basically forget what you've read in those applications and never disclose them. So, treat them with confidence. Don't disclose anything about the applications to people who are not part of the peer review process either now, during peer review or later when you've finished it. And that's obviously really critically important from a legal point of view, but a fair process point of view as well.

Slide 7 – Overview of process (12min 25sec):

So, now I want to just move quickly to the process itself and this summarises what it looks like overall for 2023, basically the same as in the last year or two. So, applications have already been submitted, of course, and the office has undertaken eligibility checks to make sure that all applications are in fact eligible to go through into peer review. And then during this time we ask all peer reviewers to look at a batch of applications which have been selected based on information you've already provided about your expertise. And tell us if you see any which have a conflict of interest for you and tell us whether you are suitable to review that application.

So, that's a really critical process that underpins the fairness of peer review. There's also a process where applications which involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health research undergo assessment against the Indigenous research excellence criteria. So that is also done [prior to the



assessment phase]. And then you will receive that information. So, applications are allocated to peer reviewers and this year you should be getting between 10 and 30 applications per reviewer. And we appreciate that at the upper end, that's really a very substantial amount of work, but it's very important that each peer reviewer sees a number of applications because this really helps with benchmarking.

If you were only to see 1 or 2 or 3, I think it becomes extremely difficult to benchmark against the overall range of quality of applications in any category [and this is why NHMRC is unlikely to assign applications for review any lower than about 12]. So that's a really critical part of this process that we ask you to look at quite a significant number in any one round. You then undertake those assessments independently and that process will go through till mid-June. And then based on that we will have ranked lists and funding recommendations generated and those recommendations will go to Research Committee and then to Council. [Noting that] Research Committee and Council don't see the names of the applications. They simply oversee the process that we've undertaken [and approve the final figures]. And then those recommendations are submitted to the Minister for Health and Aged Care for approval.

So, all of the dates there [outlined in the slide] are indicative and there can sometimes be changes for special reasons, just as we had in the pandemic year of 2020. And I should have put the second highlight, the second footnote on the mid-June date, not the August 2023 date, in order to be able to get into a better alignment with Ideas Grants in future years.

So, we've got this problem this year in order to get the timelines better for the longer term, we're going to have a second round of Investigator Grant applications opening late this year [September 2023] for funding in 2025, but that just puts extra pressure on the round this year, this one. And so, we really ask you to help us to try to meet those deadlines for everybody's interests.

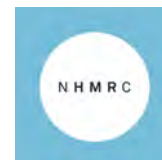
Slide 8 – Assessment Criteria (15min 22sec):

Now, I want to move on now to the assessment criteria and then into a bit more detail. Now, you're probably already familiar with this that we have in this scheme, a very strong emphasis on track record [which is] 70% of the score. We'll talk a little bit more about the publication's component of this in a minute because it's changed a little in the last year or so. Research impact is one that I won't talk about in more detail now, but again, it's often something that people want to discuss in questions, so we might come back to that. I'll also say a little bit more about the leadership component because there've been some changes to the guidelines there, and then 30% of the assessment is based on the knowledge gain that will come from the project proposal.

And it's important to remember here that we are providing really flexible funding to the people who receive these grants. So, you're assessing the overall quality and significance of the knowledge that will be gained from the proposal. But if you happen to see that there's overlap with other funding that this individual already has, don't worry about that. Just deal with this as a description of their research program that the Investigator Grant, if successful, would provide assistance to.

Slide 9 – Publications (16min 38sec):

What we are now doing across schemes is focusing [on the] assessment of the publications track record on the individual's Top 10 publications in the last 10 years. Now this is up to the top 10. So, if somebody has fewer than 10, that's fine, but it's to focus on the quality rather than the quantity of



[publications]. I'll say a little bit more about that. You might know now that preprints are allowable publications for this purpose. That was a change made a couple of years ago.

We've introduced a revised Relative to Opportunity Policy and Career context section that I'll say a little bit more about [shortly]. And it's just really important when you consider any aspect of track record that you take into account the opportunities the applicant has, and the Career context section gives a lot of information about that. We also clarified the statement of expectations. That is the justification for why somebody has applied for EL1, EL2 or Leadership [level] 1, 2 or 3. Those have been clarified and that continues in this year's round.

Slide 10 – Publications in track record assessment (17min 45sec):

So just to say a little bit more then about publications. So, as I said, we now are not providing the whole list of publications for you to review, and we ask you not to go hunting in PubMed or websites or wherever to look at the long list. What we really want you to focus on in the scoring of top publications is the Top 10 that the investigator has selected to bring to your attention. And so that's the up to 10 in the past 10 years taking into account career disruptions. So, as I said, the purpose here is really, in fact across all of our schemes, to increase the focus on the quality of the work that people have done rather than quantity.

We don't want to have a system that drives people to salami slice their research into lots of minor publications or peer reviewers to be presented with a list of 300 publications which they're then expected to comment on for quality. So, by asking the applicant and the assessor to focus on their best 10, or up to 10 if they choose to provide fewer, this is really so you can focus on looking at whether those publications have the quality that you'd expect and are making a genuine and significant contribution to science. So, it's always a question then what do we mean about the quality of published research? And that's really important.

This is really about the rigor of the research and how it's being conducted, the design of the research, not the standing of the journal. There isn't a shortcut here that says because it's being published in Nature, it must be good.

Think about what was the publication's contribution to science? And what was the applicant's contribution to the publication? And based on all of that, make a holistic assessment of the quality of the publication record as provided by the applicant, who will choose those publications for a number of different reasons. Sometimes it might be because they led the research, sometimes it might be because they made a critical contribution as a secondary author to a much larger piece of work.

Slide 11 – Publication category descriptors (19min 47sec):

So, think broadly about what their contribution to science is through the publication record, as I think this is basically repeating much of what I've just said. It's 35% of the score. Use your best judgment in differentiating between the category descriptors. We just provide you with a set of words but think on an international scale about what you're looking at. Benchmark against the opportunity of the applicant to undertake their work in the 10 years or 10 years adjusted for career disruption.

Make sure that the publications are within the 10-year timeframe. But taking into account career disruptions where they've been declared [and how this shifts the 10-year period], disregard reference to the quantity of publications or journal metrics like this is a high impact journal or this



is my H-index. So, we really want you to focus on the quality of the science itself. We know that's real work and I hope that it's made much easier by being up to 10 publications, not up to how many somebody might have published in the last 10 years.

Slide 12 - Relative to Opportunity (20min 53sec):

So relative to opportunity, this is always a very important topic. The policy was revised in 2021 to clarify the range of relevant circumstances. The Career Context section was introduced in 2021 so that reviewers can really understand what the relative to opportunity assessment is for this individual [and their career]. And a really important change in our view is that now every applicant is required to complete a Career Context summary. So, taking that into account for every applicant that you're looking at and describing their own individual circumstances and the opportunities they've had to undertake research. Disruption of research due to COVID-19 is a really important relative to opportunity consideration that will be important to many people.

Slide 13 - Statements of Expectations (21min 38sec):

Statement of expectations is provided to the applicants to help them choose which level to apply at, and they must then justify their selected level. So, when you come to look at this [level] and look at their applicant justification, you need to consider that relative to opportunity and consider whether they have in fact applied at the right level, not below or higher than the level that is appropriate for the point in their research career and their research profile.

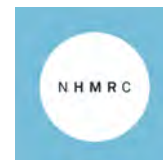
Now, the statement of expectations does provide guidance on the typical number of years post PhD at each level and the typical academic level for each level of the Investigator Grant scheme. But these are not absolute and they're not [part of the] eligibility criteria. It's really important for the applicant and for you as an assessor to look at the descriptors as well.

The typical years post-PhD and academic levels are just guides, but we know when we look at applicants across our schemes, there's huge diversity and career trajectory and the types of opportunities that people have had. So, we really want you to consider those descriptors and think about the person in that context. They're a guide. They're not to be used for eligibility, but they will help you in deciding whether somebody has justified appropriately the level at which they've applied.

Slide 14 - Updated Leadership criterion (22min 58sec):

Now the other part of the process [and] criteria that's been updated recently is the leadership criteria. As I mentioned before, and what we wanted to do here was to really recognise a broader range of leadership contributions that people make to create the sort of environment where research can be excellent and where it can be appropriately catered for. So, this is to get away from thinking that leadership is only about heading an institute, being a really senior person, or having a major job. It's leadership at every level of the research career, and it includes things like fostering collaboration, being a good mentor, their leadership contributions that are critical for the effective performance of our research sector across every stage of career. And so, we've attempted to revise the wording to really encourage both the applicant and the assessor to think very broadly about what leadership is.

So, there are now four leadership elements: research mentoring, research policy and professional leadership, institutional leadership and research programs and team leadership. Applicants can



present an example of their leadership against these elements, but they don't have to present examples against all of those elements. They're simply making the best case that they can to indicate their contribution as a leader at their level in in their field and in their institution. So, I think it's good to think very broadly about what leadership is and recognise all those different types of leadership.

Slide 15 – Peer reviewers need up-to-date fields of research listed in Sapphire for grant matching (24min 39sec):

Now, another critical thing at the moment and always for peer reviewers is to update your [research expertise] fields in Sapphire. They [categories and words] get changed from time to time and we have continued to improve our ability to match assessors to grant applications [as a result] and that absolutely depends on the information you provide.

First of all, in indicating your research expertise in Sapphire, and then through the suitability and conflicts of interest process. So, updating your research expertise is a really important part of this process. Indicating your broad research area is another really useful guide for us. And it's important to note that we've recently introduced a description of what we mean by the broad research areas. We've been using a broad research area as a category descriptor, as a description of what we fund for many, many decades. It's our longest lasting piece of data, but we haven't until now indicated what we actually mean by those broad research areas. So please look at the descriptions and choose the ones that best fits your expertise or if you're an applicant, your application.

So [it's] really helpful for us if you keep all of the information up to date in Sapphire; that allows us to not waste your time asking you to look at applications that aren't relevant and improves our matching all the way along.

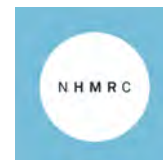
Slide 16 – Resources for peer reviewers (26min):

So now I want to turn now to some of the resources that are available and to talk about some tips for peer reviewers. Really important to read the Peer review guidelines so you understand the processes and responsibilities. We're just running through them very briefly today. Review the aims of the scheme; the assessment criteria and the category descriptors; and if necessary, just keep referring back to those as you go through your 10 to 30 applications that you're reviewing. We hope that the Peer review mentors, mentor video and the support pack will be useful to you. Please review them, and do so again if you need to, throughout the process.

We ask that everybody, even if you've done this in previous years, each year to undertake the online Implicit association test, which tests us for gender and science bias, and also review the Royal Society video on understanding unconscious bias. I think we all have biases and the test, and the video just really help to remind us how these things can play into our thinking and help us. I think, to be aware of them and try to counteract them as we go through our work and then, of course, seek advice from Peer review mentors whenever you need to. And I'll come back to that in a minute.

Slide 17 – Tips for peer reviewers – Assessment (27min 18sec):

So, some tips for assessment. The number one biggest, most important tip is to start reviewing early. We're asking you to undertake [peer] review of quite a pile of applications over roughly a



four-week period, and you really need to plan your time in order to be able to do that work, not leaving it all till the last minute when something could go wrong and you're not able to complete it. Spreading out the load so that it's not too stressful or exhausting at any one time. So really try to plan your time to the extent possible and I think that will help the process.

Many people find it useful to group the applications that they've received by level and assess them in a group and that can help with benchmarking. So whatever works for you, but many people find that helpful. We really ask that you complete your assessments within Sapphire and one of the reasons to do that is that it reduces the error rate of people uploading the wrong set of scores in for any one application. So, it unfortunately tends to happen each year.

If people are working offline that they then incorrectly upload their scores against the applications and then that creates problems down the track of course. So, if you can complete your assessments in Sapphire that avoids that potential error and Sapphire will keep saving as you go along. But if for whatever reason you need to work offline, there is an Excel template provided. You'll still then of course need to upload those data [scores] manually into Sapphire so it's an extra stage of work later. But if you do decide you're going to do that work offline, would you please let Secretariat know.

Because they're going to be watching to see whether you've started your work and how you're progressing through it. And if they don't see any progress, you may be working away in the background, but they don't see any progress and they will be getting very worried and will start hassling you. So please let them know. Also, let your secretariat know if anything comes up where you have a problem or you need clarification or help. But bottom line, say it again. Start reviewing early.

Slide 18 – Applicant feedback (29min 27sec):

So, the next thing is applicant feedback. And I think applicants really appreciate the feedback that you provide on each application and it's also a quality control process for us. So, I'll explain why. Now you're asked when you undertake peer review to provide scores, but you must also provide qualitative feedback. This is really critical. That feedback will go to the applicants exactly as written and it'll also now go to the fellow peer reviewers on that application. So, if you're one of 5 peer reviewers for an Investigator Grant application, once you've submitted your review and all the reviewers' comments are in, then they will be shared amongst the 5 peer reviewers for that application.

So, it's important to remember particularly what it will be like for the applicant when they read your report. It needs to be explained why you've scored in the way you have, comment on the strengths and weaknesses [of the application] so that they can understand why you scored [in the way you have]. Make sure that there's a really good alignment there because otherwise people will be worried [there was a mistake] and won't understand why you scored [in the way you have]. Write clearly, try to be really specific in what you say. Make sure those comments and criticisms are constructive [and] are going to be helpful because that's one of the really useful parts of this feedback. Always keep the tone professional and objective. Remembering that there's a human being at the other end.

And there's some more advice on preparing feedback in the Peer review support pack. NHMRC office will check through all comments for inappropriate content but remember that the Secretariat staff won't be able to tell whether your comments are appropriate for the science.



They'll be looking for inappropriate content at a high level, but not for whether you actually put comments that are appropriate for that application. So, nobody's going to be able to check for that. But your fellow peer reviewers will see your comments and that has turned out to be very useful for us. Occasionally, when they've come back and said to us, we think those comments didn't apply to this application. And so that's one of the ways in which the sharing of reviewer comments is a quality control step. But most importantly, I think it means that you can learn and see how other reviewers have looked at the same application, and that's a useful process we understand for peer reviewers themselves.

Slide 19 – Application-centric matching of peer reviewers (32 min):

We're using up the time fairly fast. And so, I just want to run quickly through an explanation of what we now call application-centric peer review. And this is the way we match peer reviewers to applications. And you'll know if you've been reviewing with NHMRC for a long time that we used to run Grant review panels (GRP), for all of our schemes. And so, what we would do then was try to find a set of applications that then needed to be matched to a set of people on a GRP and that's what we call panel-centric matching. And if you're going to have a GRP meeting where grants are going to be discussed, then of course that's how you have to organise the matching of peer reviewers to applications.

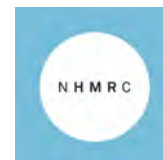
But it is much, much harder to get the matching of expertise of reviewers to applications and to avoid conflicts of interest when you're setting up GRPs for a very big scheme like Investigator Grants or in fact, Ideas Grants. So, in Investigator Grants and Ideas Grants, we now take a different approach, which is effectively to make a specific panel for each application. So that's why we call it application centric. We're now looking for the most appropriate 5 reviewers for each application where there will be the best matching of expertise without conflicts of interest. The part on the right-hand side of the screen might be visible on your computer screen. I won't read it now, but it might be visible to you now or later.

Slide 20 – Application-centric suitability of peer reviewers (33min 26sec):

Just want to show you 2 or 3 slides which look at how application-centric matching has improved the optimisation of suitability of reviewers to applications. And in 2019 and 2020, we used a different process, more aligned with GRP-matching [panel-centric matching], even though we didn't hold GRPs in 2020 because of the pandemic, but in 2021 and 2022 and now in 2023 we've got a full application-centric matching process which does not rely on the formation of GRPs. And what you can see, I hope, from this slide is that when people have been asked [about suitability, they tend] to say whether they had no suitability, limited suitability, moderate or yes suitability against the applications that were presented to them finally for review, we've had a very much higher moderate and yes suitability than we did in 2021 and 2022. And of course, we're hoping 2023 as well, then we did in earlier years. So, we've now got in 2022, 86% of people were given applications to review for which they said they were suitable.

Slide 21 – Application-centric – reviewer responses (34min 34sec):

Then when we ask in the Peer review survey after the process was finished, whether people agreed that in general the applications assigned to them match their area of expertise, you can see at the top of that bar graph that 91% of people agreed or strongly agreed with that statement in 2022, compared with only 48% back in 2019 when we used a GRP-based process. So, the matching has



been getting better and better as we've gone to a more application-centric process and as the matching itself has been refined in the work that the office does based on the information you provide.

Slide 22 – Application-centric – reduced assessment burden (35min 13sec):

The other thing we're really pleased to see is that it's been possible to achieve a reduced assessment burden for peer reviews as the years have gone on. And so, in 2022 we only needed to provide an average of 18 applications to people reviewing Leadership applications and 15 to people reviewing Emerging Leadership compared with a much larger number in earlier years. So, we'll continue to work on how to get an appropriate balance between giving you enough applications to review that you'll get good benchmarking, but not so many, that it is a hugely burdensome task because we do recognise that for many people it is a really, very big piece of work.

Slide 23 – Peer review mentors (37min 28sec):

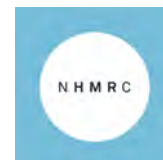
Now we're really delighted that we have a number of people who are willing to be Peer review mentors for us this year, and that means they're going to be available to you via the Secretariat to provide advice on how to do peer review. And so there are six shown on the screen here, and that's several more than we had last year. Some people have come back, but we've really delighted to have some additional people who are helping us with this process this year.

Patsy Yates is at QUT (Queensland University of Technology). She's a distinguished professor and she's Executive Dean of the Faculty of Health, QUT. Patsy is a registered nurse with extensive experience as a leader in education and research in the health sector. She's a long-standing committee member at NHMRC. Before her appointment as Executive Dean, she was Professor and Head of the School of Nursing at QUT, and she's also co-director of QUT Centre for Health Care Transformation. So very experienced with health services research and clinical research.

Professor Sarah Russell is at the Swinburne University of Technology and the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre. Her interest is understanding how immune cell development occurs and how polarity and tissue organisation influences cell fate. And I have known Sarah for many years and know of her very strong interest in T cells, how they develop, how they respond to pathogens and cancer, how errors in their development can lead to leukemia. So, Sarah has very different expertise then from Patsy, for example.

We're really delighted to welcome Professor Mark Nicol as a new Peer review mentor. He is a medical microbiologist in the School of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Western Australia. [He] also holds an honorary appointment at the University of Cape Town, in South Africa. And his passion is using modern molecular tools to understand complex microbial communities. So again, a very different expertise.

Stuart Tangye is from the Garvan Institute of Medical Research, another passionate immunologist, in this case human immunology, cell biology and immune deficiencies. Stuart has been at the Garvan since 2006 and he holds an Investigator Grant and in fact he was the top-ranked Leadership applicant in the first round in 2019. So, he knows how to write a good Investigator Grant application.



Professor Jennifer Stow is at the University of Queensland. She's a molecular cell biologist and head of the Protein Trafficking and Inflammation Research Laboratory, the laboratory at the Institute of Molecular Bioscience.

And finally, Dr. Beth Allison is from the Hudson Institute of Medical Research. She is a vascular physiologist, with a strong interest in the developmental programming of health and disease. Beth also holds an Investigator Grant and works with the Neurodevelopment and Neuroprotection and the Prenatal Transition Research Groups in the Ritchie Centre.

So, these are 6 really terrific people, very experienced grant writers, grant holders and peer reviewers. So, they really know the system very well and have contributed to NHMRC in many ways over the years and to other international funding systems. So, they are available for you to seek advice from, not on the science of the applications that you're reviewing, but on broad peer review questions about how to approach issues. If you want to seek advice from a peer review mentor, please do that through the Secretariat and they'll put you in contact as appropriate.

Slide 24 – Gender equity (39min 29sec):

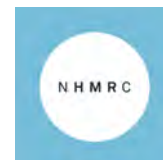
And so, then I just want to say very briefly what you probably already know and that is we have a new gender equity initiative in this year's Investigator Grant scheme and for the years ahead. So, we've talked about that a lot in the last year and I'm not going to go over all the background to it. I hope you're already familiar with it, but there are some important aspects of these changes.

First of all, something that we won't change is that we will continue to use structural priority funding, which is near-miss funding for women at the Emerging Leadership levels 1 and 2, to the extent necessary to achieve our gender equity targets, which is equal-funded rates for men and women applying at those two levels. For the Leadership category, the new initiative, and this is for L1, L2 and L3 combined, is to target awarding equal numbers of grants by gender across the whole of the Leadership category.

Now that's subject to there being sufficient grants from both genders that reach a certain threshold score. So, there's no reduction of quality there, but it is a target to achieve equal numbers of grants to men and women. And then critically important also this year is that non-binary researchers who declare that they're non-binary in their application will be included alongside women in both of those gender equity interventions, the structural priority funding, and the target of equal numbers of grants by gender.

So those are important changes. But the really critical thing to say to you today is that this is not relevant to the peer review process that you're going to undertake. We ask you simply to review the applications as they are before you. Don't consider how structural priority funding or targets might be applied post peer review. Simply do a fair and considered review of all applications, and the gender issues will be considered by NHMRC after the peer review process. So that's really central I think, to the integrity of peer review that you review what's in front of you and take into account the relative to opportunity and Career context information that has been provided.

So now we have some time, I hope, for questions and answers, I'll hand back to Julie to lead that part of the program.



Thank you to webinar participants

Dr Julie Glover: Thank you very much, and thanks for the great discussion. And if there's anything else that comes up that you think about after this, or as you're going through your peer review processes, please don't hesitate to reach out to your secretariat. You'll have a particular secretariat nominated to you. And also, as Anne mentioned, we do have the mentors available, so we will have drop-in sessions for those mentors, and they will be very useful I think as things come up as you are doing your peer review. So, thanks very much everyone for your contributions today. And thanks to Anne for the presentation and the team for putting everything together. Thanks all and good luck with the next steps in the process.

3. Webinar Questions & Answers

Topic - Outlier scores

Question 1: With a lack of consultation between reviewers to discuss applications in a panel setting, how does NHMRC handle outlier scores for Investigator Grants?

Response:

Prof. Anne Kelso: This is a really important issue, and I know it's one of the things that's come much more to the fore since we moved to application-centric peer review and having independent assessment by five people. So, we're very close to being ready to publish a report that looks at scores and issues about outlier scores. And I think there'll be data there that will be of interest to people, but that's just going to take a little bit longer to be published.

What is important to know is that the Secretariat reviews each group of scores to look for any outlier scores, and if they're identified, the Secretariat will look at whether the comments and the scores align. That's a really useful way to tell whether people have scored appropriately, of course, but also whether they've uploaded the correct scores for their application. This process has sometimes identified people uploading the wrong scores for the application or other issues of that nature and if it looks like there's any kind of problem, then the Secretariat will go back to the assessor and check with them whether they really meant that score.

What's really interesting, and I think this is useful information for applicants and assessors to be aware of, that is most of the time peer reviewers will say, no, I meant that score. Now that score might be low, let's say, compared with the other four scores for that application. But that assessor may have the particular expertise, a particular insight which means that they identify a problem that the other assessors haven't, because their expertise is somewhat different and the assessor will say, I meant to give that score. So, it's really important to know that each score matters.

We're not going to throw away scores because they don't fit the others. It's really important that your score is valued and that if it's your opinion that the score should be, let's say four instead of six, that is your considered expert judgment. And we respect that, and it is a perfectly valid outlier score. However, if it's because of an error, then we'll be attempting to pick that up and to make sure that any error is corrected if that's the reason for the outlier.

I hope that helps, but it is a continuing discussion and I hope that the report that we'll put out will add to that discussion.



Topic – Publications

Question 2: What are NHMRC's expectations on assessing the publications component of Track Record? Are we expected to read the nominated publications?

Prof. Anne Kelso: I think it's very hard to assess the quality of a publication if you don't read it. So, we really are asking that you not use the shortcut of saying, well, it was published in a high-ranked journal or the position of the author was, you know, 10 out of 50 or something.

When looking at a publication, NHMRC recommends that you look at the paper itself and say, 'Is this high-quality research and has this made a contribution?' And I know that's significant work. It's a really important part of the scoring of track record and it is a critical output of the applicant. So, I think the best way to assess quality of a paper is actually to read it.

We've always asked peer reviewers to assess the quality of the publication list, but we previously asked them to look at the entire publication list for 10 years and that would be an impossible task. And it was really, I think, driving people to sort of scan the list and say, look, there are lots of publications here. This person must be good, or there are, you know, some Nature, Science, Cell or New England Journal [of Medicine] or Lancet papers, and therefore this person must be good. And that is not an appropriate way to assess the quality of somebody's publications. So, I personally don't see how a good review of quality can be done without looking at the publications themselves. You will of course get guidance from the applicant who will have a box for each publication to say why they've chosen it.

As in any kind of review process, I would not just take the applicant's word for it. You need to make your own assessment. But the other thing I'd say is this is why we try so hard to match the applications to your area of expertise, so that you have a better chance of being familiar with the publications or the field in general. So, you use your best judgment about those publications without necessarily reading every aim and method in those publications. So that's why our matching of peer reviewers to applications is so important.

Now, NHMRC for a long time has subscribed to the [DORA](#) declaration on research assessment that recommends we do not rely on impact factors as a way of assessing research quality. I think it is really important, and you noted that there will be papers in journals that have very high impact factors, you know like Nature, which will be wrong and may not be cited.

There'll be others that are cited because they're wrong. So just a raw number of citations in itself I think isn't an answer. I do hope that if you're familiar with the field, then, you know, the ones that have turned out to be wrong and are being cited because they were wrong.

There will also be areas of research which will never get published in those very prominent journals, and may never get many citations, but might nevertheless be high quality, critically important work. So that's where relying only on the metrics or on knowing that the journal is high quality might not be sufficient to be able to say that this is an important paper. So, it's that kind of diversity that's really important to recognise, I think, because otherwise there's some sorts of research we will never fund simply because it's never going to get into New England Journal of Medicine say.

I'm not going to tell people how to read a paper, but I think in the end the best way to assess the quality is to look at the paper itself and not to rely on a metric. And that's what we're asking you to find a way to do.



What we will continue to try to do at our end is to keep the numbers of applications per assessor down to more reasonable levels, and we've made really good progress on that. I'm also acknowledging that the outcome of the work that you do is critically important for us in then making sound recommendations and on who ultimately gets these rather valuable grants. So those might be the papers through that triage process that you go and read.

Peer Reviewer: I think you have to do a bit of a triaging process and you need to look through all of your applications, start looking at which ones you think are the really high-quality ones, allocating more time to that. Perhaps some of the papers in the top 10, you're only going to look at the abstract, those sorts of things. You have to really think about triaging processes to ensure that you do the best assessment of quality while still making the workload reasonable. So that's my suggestion for inexperienced reviewers.

Prof. Anne Kelso: I think that's a really sensible suggestion. Scanning all of the applications to start with and kind of having the beginnings of a hierarchy, if you like, and there will be some that where you don't need to spend as much time because they clearly, as you say, focus, your effort seems like a really sensible suggestion to me.

Peer Reviewer: My thought was that we were supposed to be assessing the impact of those [publications] because the applicant has provided detail of what that paper, a summary of what that paper was about and what it led to. So, did it lead to other publications? Did it lead to guidelines? Did it lead to some real-world impact that's of importance? And I thought that that's really what we were trying to assess as a holistic thing, that we just have a read through of all of that and then make an assessment about the quality of that publication list as a whole in terms of what that applicant is achieving with their career.

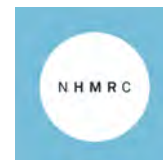
Prof. Anne Kelso: Thank you. And first of all, for the publications criterion, we're asking you to assess the quality and scientific contribution to science. The bigger impact question – you know, there is a separate, as you may be aware, a separate section of the track record that is about impact and is really drawing on whatever aspects of the person's work that they choose to develop through that part.

But really it's quality and contribution to science are the criteria for the publications bit. And of course, I think I agree with you that part of it is assessing the applicant's claims against those topics. But in the end, quality does depend on the quality of the paper, the individual papers. It's not simply a matter of the overall impact of those publications. I think it's also important to try to think about publications as different from the impact section of the track record.

NHMRC response: (excerpt of correspondence provided by Professor Anne Kelso to all peer reviewers on 26 April 2023)

Guidance to applicants

As outlined in the [Investigator Grants 2023 Grant Opportunity Guidelines](#) (Appendix H, section 6.14), applicants are required to nominate up to 10 of their best publications from the past 10 years (taking into account any career disruptions) and provide explanations of why these publications have been selected, outlining the quality and contribution to science, and their contribution to each. Applicants are advised that the explanation field is not to be used to provide additional track record information (e.g. conference participation, awards, patents, publications not already nominated in the applicant's Top 10) but can include field weighted metrics and citation metrics.



Journal metrics such as Journal Impact Factors are not to be included in any part of the application (Appendix H, section 6.14.2).

Guidance to peer reviewers

Similarly, the [Investigator Grants 2023 Peer Review Guidelines](#) (Appendix E) advises that peer reviewers are to assess nominated publications on their quality and contribution to science, including the applicant's contribution to each, and that they must not take into consideration any additional track record information provided in the publication explanation field.

Section [4.3.6.4](#) of the Peer Review Guidelines provides guidance on the use of metrics and states that peer reviewers are to take into account their expert knowledge of their field of research, as well as citation and publication practices of that field, when assessing the publications component of an applicant's track record. Journal metrics, if included by an applicant, should not be considered in the assessment of publications, in line with the recommendations made in the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DoRA), of which NHMRC is a signatory.

NHMRC's expectations in assessing publications

NHMRC expects peer reviewers to use their best judgement in providing fair and consistent review of the nominated publications' quality, contribution to science and the applicant's claims for them. Given the Publications criterion makes up 35% of the total score for these significant grants (more than any other criterion and more than Knowledge Gain at 30%), NHMRC expects peer reviewers to expend proportionate effort in reviewing this criterion.

Publication quality refers to characteristics such as the rigour of experimental design, statistical significance of findings [read, appropriate use of statistical methods], reproducibility of results, analytical strength of interpretations and significance of outcomes, rather than the number of publications or the standing of the journals in which they are published.

NHMRC does not, however, expect peer reviewers to replicate the review undertaken when manuscripts are submitted for publication. Your expertise, your familiarity with the field of research and the applicant's explanations for each publication will help you decide whether you need to read a nominated publication, in full or in part, to verify the applicant's claims for it.

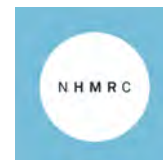
NHMRC has always asked Investigator Grant peer reviewers to assess the quality and contribution to science of applicants' publications. Two important changes have reduced the burden of this task for reviewers – first, the requirement since 2022 to focus only on the 'Top 10 in 10' rather than the full list of publications for the last 10 years and, second, the greatly improved matching of applications to peer reviewers with suitable expertise following the introduction of application-centric reviewer selection in 2021. NHMRC welcomes feedback on all our processes and will continue to work with the sector to improve our policies and guidance in support of high-quality peer review.

Topic – Moving from grant review panels (GRP) to application-centric peer review

Question 3: Can NHMRC clarify its approach for moving away from panel meetings and how outlier scoring is considered?

Response:

Prof. Anne Kelso: Moving away from GRPs, some things have been lost and some things have been gained. I certainly think people [peer reviewers] appreciate the opportunity to get together and



talk about applications and they learn from each other in doing so. And sometimes misunderstandings are removed. So, that is something that is lost by doing independent peer review.

What you gain by doing independent peer review is true independence, and the other thing that you gain is much better matching. So, if we just consider the first one first, we know from feedback from many people who've participated in traditional grant review panel meetings in the past, that there have been instances where one person really dominates the discussion and can very easily influence the outcome of an application in a way that may or may not be appropriate.

In a GRP discussion, you have other kinds of panel dynamics happen that can be an impediment to high-quality peer review. This is an issue with GRPs that we've been aware of and is more likely to be in play when you have a GRP that's made up of people who don't all have expertise which is a part of the nature of forming a GRP.

By going to independent peer review where the matching of expertise to the grant application, which is very, very strong according to the feedback we get from assessors, then we believe that the independent peer review will give us a better-quality report and outcomes. The scores and feedback also reflect the diversity of opinions that people may have about that grant application. With any system there are pluses and minuses, but we believe from the data we're seeing for the two big schemes, Investigator Grants and Ideas Grants that independent peer review is giving us a better outcome.

Additional advice from NHMRC:

Once all scores and applicant feedback have been submitted to Sapphire, peer reviewer comments are shared anonymously between reviewers of the same application to increase transparency and accountability of the peer review process and allow peer reviewers to compare their assessments with those of other reviewers.

Following this, NHMRC undertakes outlier screening to identify reviews where scores differ substantially from those of other reviewers, or where it is apparent comments do not align with scores. This may involve NHMRC contacting peer reviewers to ask for clarification on their assessments, noting that it is common and expected that peer reviewers will vary in their scoring and justifications for their conclusions.

Topic - Scoring calibration/benchmarking applicants

Question 4: Does NHMRC perform a scoring calibration exercise on scores submitted through independent peer review?

Response:

Prof. Anne Kelso: No, we don't have a formal calibration exercise at this stage.

I think it's a really interesting idea that I hope we can explore at some stage, how we would do that, because I think this question of calibration is the most challenging for everybody.

NHMRC are really asking you to use your own judgment and knowledge of your field and of the international spectrum of quality of research in assessing against the criteria.

I know that it's difficult to distinguish between outstanding, excellent, very good. But think of it across that scale and think of it internationally and remember that something that gets a 7 has to



be extraordinarily good. Something that gets a very low score is really very much at the lower end of the spectrum.

Question 5: Has NHMRC looked at the effects of scores if the applications were ranked from best to worst within the category score for reviewers? Could this be a better way of scaling rather than peer reviewers providing raw scores?

Response:

Prof. Anne Kelso: NHMRC did do some internal work several years ago looking at what will give us the best discrimination and the best overall, robustness of outcome when using the 7-point score grade and ranking pulled all the assessments together versus a ranking process that you describe where, if you've got 20 applications to review, you rank them 1 to 20.

Based on the analysis NHMRC did some years ago, the process we're currently using appeared to be more robust. This is a really interesting question and is one that we'll continue to look at from time to time to ensure we're using the most appropriate statistical process according to the exact mechanism that we're using each year.

Question 6: How can we benchmark effectively if we are entering scores directly into Sapphire - is it easy enough to go back and adjust the assessments as we proceed through the applications?

Advice from NHMRC:

NHMRC strongly encourages peer reviewers to work within Sapphire but understand this is not always possible. In Sapphire, it is possible to enter scores and applicant feedback as you work through your assessments because Sapphire autosaves these scores and comments on entry. You can continue to amend these until you submit the assessment for each application.

You should only submit when you have finalised your assessment. After submission, you will then be able to see your overall score against the application. Should you submit a score, and subsequently realise you have made an error, please contact your secretariat.

Due to the tight timeline for assessments this year, NHMRC would appreciate that you enter your assessments into Sapphire as you complete them. This will enable us to avoid unnecessarily contacting you where you are working offline by providing secretariats the re-assurance that you have commenced your allocated assessments.

To assist peer reviewers who have difficulty working within Sapphire, or who prefer to work 'offline', a blank Excel assessment template has been provided to record scores, peer reviewer notes and applicant feedback, which then needs to be entered manually into Sapphire and submitted.

Topic - Review sharing/applicant feedback

Question 7: After I have reviewed the applicant feedback provided by other assessors of the same application, will there be an opportunity to rescore?

Response:

Prof. Anne Kelso: At this point, we're not providing an opportunity to rescore.



Providing reviewers access to the applicant feedback provided is a post-review process and it is useful for picking up some quality issues where there've been errors, for example, in uploading scores, however it's not an opportunity to change scores outside these reasons to ensure that this will continue to be an independent peer review process.

I can imagine in the future NHMRC might think about other ways to manage the fact that we've got a specific panel for each application. However, at this stage it's not an opportunity to change the scores, unless an error has been identified. Really, that's the point. Not simply because you think somebody else's opinion might be more appropriate than your own.

Question 8: Is it possible to receive data on the spread of scores for an applicant that I have assessed?

Advice from NHMRC:

De-identified applicant feedback sharing will be introduced in Sapphire for the 2023 Investigator Grants round. When available, it will allow peer reviewers to view the de-identified applicant feedback provided by other assessors on their assigned applications.

This is to help increase the transparency and accountability of the peer review process, as well as provide a gauge for how your own assessments compared with those of other peer reviewers on the same application.

In consultation with its advisory committees, NHMRC will consider the benefits and disadvantages of allowing visibility of de-identified scores of other assessors in future efforts to improve the accountability and transparency of independent peer review.

Topic – Feedback mechanism

Question 11: How can I provide feedback regarding independent peer review, or anything else related to Investigator Grants peer review?

Response:

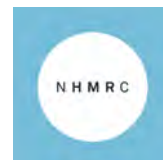
Prof. Anne Kelso: Any suggestions or feedback will also be very useful to come back to us through the peer reviewer survey after peer review is finished. NHMRC pay a lot of attention to the feedback we get through those surveys and we're very happy to hear them.

Topic – Scoring data providing to applicants

Question 12: Are applicants provided with detailed scoring that would reveal if one negative peer reviewer contributed to them not being funded? Applicants would find this useful in assessing if they should re-apply in future rounds.

NHMRC Response:

All applicants will receive a summary of the mean of all assessors' scores for each of the 6 assessment criteria, their overall score, as well as the approximate funding cut-off for their relevant funding competition (i.e. EL1, EL2 and Leadership). Individual assessor scores are not provided to applicants. In addition, applicants are provided with the proportion of applications and mean scores for each criterion within their funding competition, for applications falling within each overall scoring category (i.e. 5.5 – 6.5 is category 6).



Topic – Assignment of applications to peer reviewers

Question 13: How many peer reviewers are assigned to each application?

Advice from NHMRC:

NHMRC allocates each application to 5 peer reviewers for assessment based on peer reviewer information in the peer reviewer's Sapphire profile, and the field/s of research of the application.

In some instances, we may need to re-allocate applications to new peer reviewers late in the assessment process if we are advised of a high conflict or peer reviewer unavailability.

In some cases, applications receive less than 5 assessments (with a minimum requirement of 3 assessments) where NHMRC is advised of a late conflict and cannot reallocate the application or peer reviewers fail to complete their assessments on time.

Question 14: How many applications will each peer reviewer be asked to review this year?

Advice from NHMRC:

We anticipate that peer reviewers will receive 10–25 applications to review during the 4-week assessment period. However, the average number of assessments is approximately 15. Moving to an application-centric peer review process has allowed NHMRC to reduce the average number of assessments per reviewer from around 27 in 2020 to 15 in 2023. NHMRC is unable to tailor the number of applications allocated to a peer reviewer's FTE. Should you have any concerns about your ability to conduct your assessments in the allocated timeframe, please get in touch with your secretariat as early as possible.

Question 16: Are peer reviewers only assigned to their Category i.e. only EL1 recipients to review EL1 applications? And will reviewers at different stages in their career be able to review researchers in a different stage of their career?

Advice from NHMRC:

Early-mid career researchers will be matched to Emerging Leadership applications (EL1 and EL2), and where possible, more experienced researchers will be allocated applications that were submitted in the Leadership categories (L1, L2 and L3). However, it is possible that some more experienced researchers will be allocated EL1 and EL2 level applications.

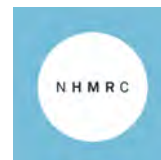
To ensure the best possible matching of applications to peer reviewer expertise, it is important to ensure that your peer reviewer information in your Sapphire profile is up to date. This includes entering and updating Peer Review Area (PRAs), Broad Research Areas (BRAs), Fields of Research (FORs) and Keywords.

Question 18: Can applicants nominate people they do not want to review their grant?

Advice from NHMRC:

No. The non-assessor nomination process for NHMRC funding schemes was discontinued in 2017.

As detailed in the *Investigator Grants 2023 Peer Review Guidelines* (2023 PRGs), NHMRC has established several policies and procedures to strengthen the integrity of peer review that apply to all funding schemes, including:



- requiring all peer reviewers to declare disclosures of interest against every application they have been assigned
- reminding peer reviewers at every opportunity of their obligations towards preserving the integrity and confidentiality of the peer review process.

Information on the disclosure of interest obligations for peer reviewers can be found in the 2023 PRGs. Peer reviewers who fail to disclose an interest without a reasonable excuse will result in the termination of their appointment under section 44B of the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992*.

Topic – Examples of past applications/reviews

Question 19: Does NHMRC provide any exemplars? e.g. past successful applications and their assigned scores/reviewer comments?

Advice from NHMRC:

Due to privacy and confidentiality considerations, NHMRC is unable to provide past applications and their scores and reviewer comments. When funding outcomes are announced publicly, peer reviewers may consider cross-referencing successful applications with ones they have assessed.

Topic – Peer review mentors (PRMs)

Question 21: Without panels or access to other peer review comments, it makes it very difficult for new reviewers to gain experience and benchmark. Is there any additional support for first time reviewers?

Advice from NHMRC:

Similar to the 2022 Investigator Grants round, peer review mentors (PRMs) will be on hand during the assessment phase of peer review in 2023. Should you need to speak with a PRM, please contact your secretariat.

PRMs are independent senior researchers with experience in conducting Investigator Grant/NHMRC peer review. Their primary role is to provide advice and mentoring during the assessment phase of peer review. They are available to provide advice to peer reviewers on broad questions around effective peer review methods/practices during the assessment phase.

New in 2023, PRMs will also host 30-minute online drop-in sessions twice a week during the 4-week assessment period to allow peer reviewers to seek advice directly in an informal environment.

Topic – Relative to opportunity and career context considerations

Question 23: For consideration of relative to opportunity, should we consider the funding an applicant has had from all sources over the 10-year period of publications? Should teaching and research workload be considered in assessing the career context summary provided by the applicant?



Advice from NHMRC:

Comprehensive guidance on NHMRC's *Relative to Opportunity Policy* is provided on [NHMRC's website](#) and at Appendix I and Appendix J of the [Investigator Grants 2023 Peer Reviewer Guidelines](#).

NHMRC considers 'relative to opportunity' to mean that peer reviewers should assess an applicant's track record of research productivity and professional contribution in the context of their career stage and circumstances, by taking into consideration whether the applicant's productivity and contribution are commensurate with the opportunities available to them.

NHMRC expects that peer reviewers will give clear and explicit attention to these principles to identify the highest quality research and researchers. NHMRC recognises that life circumstances can be varied and therefore it is not possible to implement a formulaic approach to applying relative to opportunity considerations during peer review.

Every applicant is now required to complete a career context summary describing their individual circumstances and opportunities for research. Circumstances considered during peer review include, but are not limited to, research role and responsibilities (career stage and amount of time spent as an active researcher), research opportunities, access to resources and facilities, professional responsibilities, personal and other circumstances, such as disruption of research due to COVID-19.

Topic – Budget considerations

Question 25: If the applicants say they'll do something in the application that is completely not feasible within the budget proposed (e.g. doing 2 RCTs with \$50k/year), do we need to take this into consideration?

Advice from NHMRC:

As applicants are not required to provide budget justifications, reviewers are to consider all of the proposed research described in the 5-year research vision when assessing knowledge gain, irrespective of whether any part of the research plan has already obtained funding. Peer reviewers are to make no distinction in their assessments of the 5-year research vision/plan, between applicants who have held, or currently hold an Investigator Grant, and applicants who have not.

Please refer to Appendix E of the *Investigator Grants 2023 Peer Review Guidelines* pp. 41–42, for further guidance on knowledge gain assessment. In addition, the applicant may have funding from other sources to support the proposed research studies which are not described in the application.

In 2023 the Investigator Grant research support package available to successful applicants is \$50,000/annum for EL1, \$200,000/annum for EL2 and \$400,000/annum for all levels of the Leadership category.