



Australian Government

National Health and Medical Research Council

NHMRC Action Plan for Responsible Research Assessment

Members of the Coalition for
Advancing Research Assessment



N H M R C

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To obtain information regarding NHMRC publications or submit a copyright request, contact:
E: communications@nhmrc.gov.au
P: (02) 6217 9000

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About National Health and Medical Research Council

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is Australia's leading funding agency for health and medical research. With NHMRC support, Australia undertakes outstanding research which has contributed to significant improvements in individual and population health. It is our mission to build a healthy Australia and contribute to the broader research and innovation systems in Australia. NHMRC is committed to enhancing the ways researchers are assessed when applying for its grant opportunities to ensure our processes are equitable, evidence-informed, and continue to support high-quality research.

Context

NHMRC is committed to supporting and promoting high-quality research that benefits the health of Australians. Research assessment is a crucial part of ensuring that research is conducted with integrity and excellence. However, current research assessment practices can rely on narrow and flawed indicators, such as journal impact factors and citation indices, that do not capture the full value and diversity of research outputs and outcomes. This can create incentives that result in undesirable outcomes, thereby undermining the trust and credibility of research.

NHMRC is dedicated to enhancing its research assessment procedure. This commitment is reflected in the ongoing development of initiatives aimed at improving research quality, and in alignment with open science principles and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) recommendations.

NHMRC's Research Assessment Reform (2012–2025)

Since 1998, NHMRC has implemented numerous initiatives to foster a more inclusive, responsible and impactful research ecosystem. We have made significant shifts in our research assessments to:

- value quality of research over quantity of publications
- incorporate research impact assessment in key grant schemes
- incorporate consumer and end-user perspectives in assessment in targeted grant schemes
- focus on diversity of researcher and research funded, particularly in terms of gender and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research and researchers.

These initiatives align with the commitments outlined in the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (ARRA).

2012

- Developed the [Relative to Opportunity Policy](#), which recognises that not all research careers are the same and requires peer reviewers to assess an applicant's track record 'relative to opportunity'. (ARRA commitment 1)

2013

- Developed the [Principles of Peer Review](#), a high-level guiding statement that underpins NHMRC's peer review processes and applies to all NHMRC funding schemes. Its 8 principles aim to ensure that the process of evaluating research funding applications is fair, transparent and of high quality. (ARRA commitment 2)
- Endorsed DORA. Since endorsing DORA, NHMRC has integrated more diverse research contributions and advises against the use of publication metrics in applications. (ARRA commitment 1, 3, 6 & 7).

2015

- Developed the [NHMRC Open Access Policy](#) which is underpinned by the principle that publicly funded research should be shared openly and at the earliest possible opportunity. Updated in 2022 & 2023. (ARRA Principles for overarching conditions)

2017

- Developed the [Road Map 3: A strategic framework for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health through research](#) (Road Map 3) to guide and communicate NHMRC's objectives and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research for the next decade. Road Map 3 follows on from the release of Road Map 1 in 2002 and Road Map 2 in 2010. (ARRA Principles for assessment criteria and processes)
- Consumers and community representatives included in peer review panels for the Targeted Calls for Research scheme and some priority-driven grant opportunities.

2018

- Developed the [Research Impact Track Record Assessment Framework \(RITRA\)](#) to evaluate the impact of researchers' work beyond traditional academic metrics. These revisions align with the DORA recommendations and aim to improve the evaluation of research quality and impact in research assessment. (ARRA commitment 1)

2019

- Developed the [NHMRC Research Quality Strategy](#) which outlines the key areas NHMRC will focus on to provide guidance and support good research practices throughout the research cycle. (ARRA commitments 1, 2, 6 & 7)

2020

- Developed the [application-centric peer review](#) process, which involves pre-matching reviewers to applications based on expertise. Traditional panel-based reviews often lacked the breadth of expertise needed to assess diverse applications. Application-centric peer review ensures that each application is reviewed by the most suitable experts. An evaluation of this approach found it improved transparency, accountability and has increased the average number of peer reviews each application receives through reducing conflicts of interest. (ARRA commitment 2)

2022

- Introduced the [Top 10 in 10 publications](#) assessment criteria to emphasise research quality over publication quantity by limiting applicants to listing their top 10 publications from the past 10 years. This reduces peer review burden and ensures equitable assessment across career stages. (ARRA commitment 1, 2 & 6)
- Introduced peer review mentors and training videos aimed to support peer reviewers by providing guidance, tips, and best practices to ensure fair, consistent, and high-quality assessments of grant applications. (ARRA commitment 2, 6 & 7)

2023

- Conducted a comprehensive public consultation on the [Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria](#) (previously called the Darwin Criteria, which was adopted in 1998) to gather diverse perspectives and insights from Indigenous communities, researchers, and stakeholders to refine and enhance the criteria. (ARRA commitment 1 & 6)
- Consumers and community representatives included as scoring members of peer review panels in Targeted Calls for Research, with their own scoring criteria.

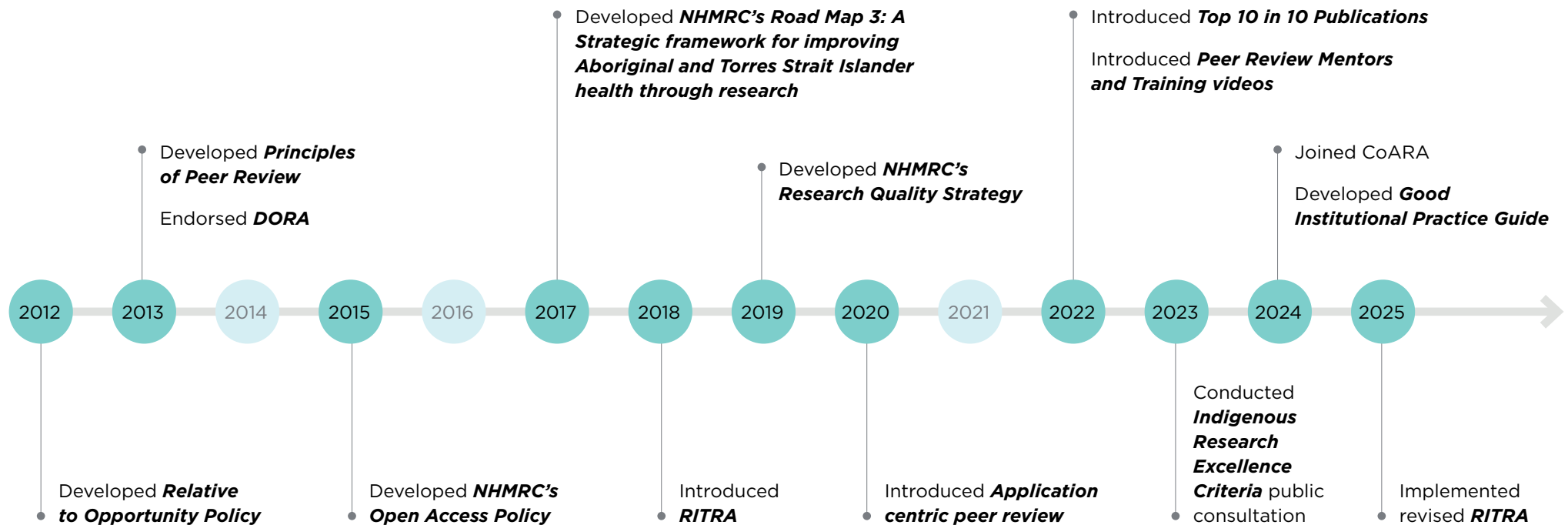
2024

- Developed the [Good Institutional Practice Guide](#), a guide on how institutional leaders can promote and facilitate the conduct of high-quality research, providing guidance on rewarding and recognising diverse practices, activities and careers in research appropriately. (ARRA commitment 1 & 7)
- Joined CoARA and signed the ARRA.

2025

- Implemented a revised RITRA framework for the 2026 Investigator Grant round (opened 4 June 2025), incorporating feedback from public consultation on the evaluation of grant-scheme specific assessment criteria.

Summary of key NHMRC research assessment reform activities, 2012–2025.

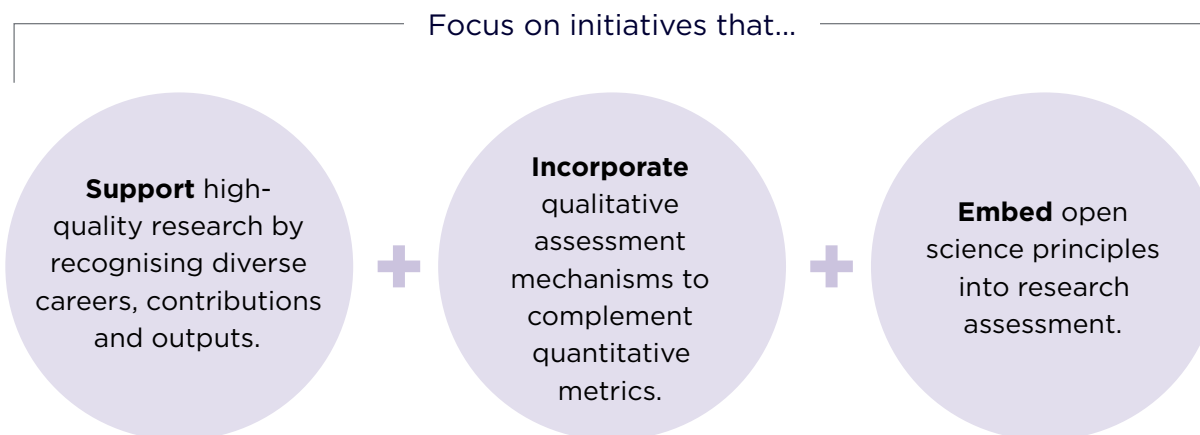


Scope

The NHMRC Action Plan for Responsible Research Assessment focuses on advancing responsible research assessment practices within NHMRC, with a strong emphasis on aligning with the principles of ARRA to promote fairness, transparency, diversity and inclusivity in research assessment. Its scope includes the development, implementation, and promotion of initiatives that:

- support high-quality research by recognising diverse careers, contributions and outputs
- incorporate qualitative assessment mechanisms to complement quantitative metrics
- embed open science principles into research assessment.

NHMRC's remit as a research funder is evaluating and funding researchers and their projects, ensuring that our investments contribute to advancing health outcomes and scientific knowledge.



CoARA Core Commitments

- 1 Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research.
- 2 Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators.
- 3 Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal and publication based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index.
- 4 Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment.
- 5 Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organisational changes committed to.
- 6 Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes.
- 7 Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes as well as their use.
- 8 Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition.
- 9 Communicate progress made on adherence to the Principles and implementation of the Commitments.
- 10 Evaluate practices, criteria and tools based on solid evidence and the state-of the-art research on research, and make data openly available for evidence gathering and research.

Action Plan 2025–2030

This NHMRC 2025–2030 Action Plan for Responsible Research Assessment is a formal commitment to continuing to improve responsible research assessment. It sets out actions to advance and promote responsible research assessment practices in Australia and to share insights with the Coalition. Building on existing efforts, the plan seeks to recognise a wider range of research career paths and outputs by incorporating qualitative assessment mechanisms and embracing the principles of open science.

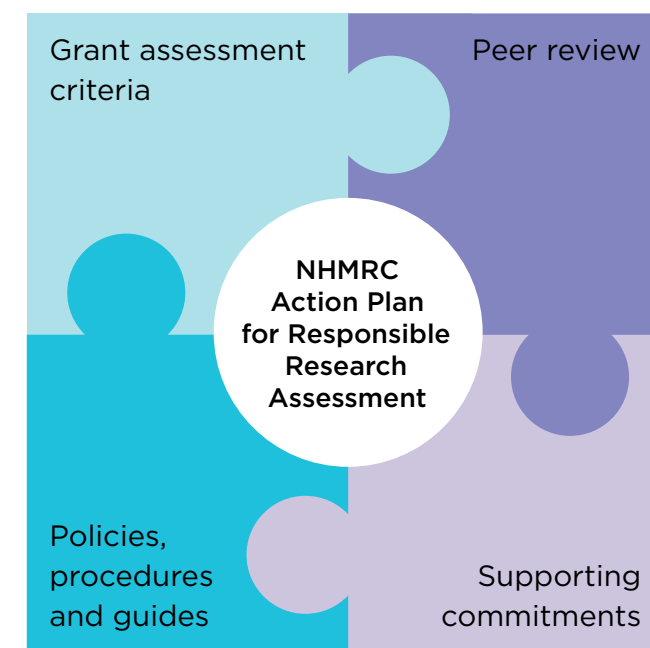
The action plan is divided into 4 key areas:

1. Grant assessment criteria
2. Peer review
3. Policies, procedures and guides
4. Supporting commitments.

Each area represents a core aspect of NHMRC activity. These areas are interconnected, feeding into each other and operating across the organisation as a whole, as well as within the individual grant schemes. The action plan is underpinned by NHMRC's commitment to continuous improvement and enhancement through a [process of ongoing systematic evaluation](#).

The actions are mapped to a model of behaviour change intervention, which is based on progressive steps of cultural change.

Relationship between the 4 key areas of the NHMRC Action Plan for Responsible Research Assessment

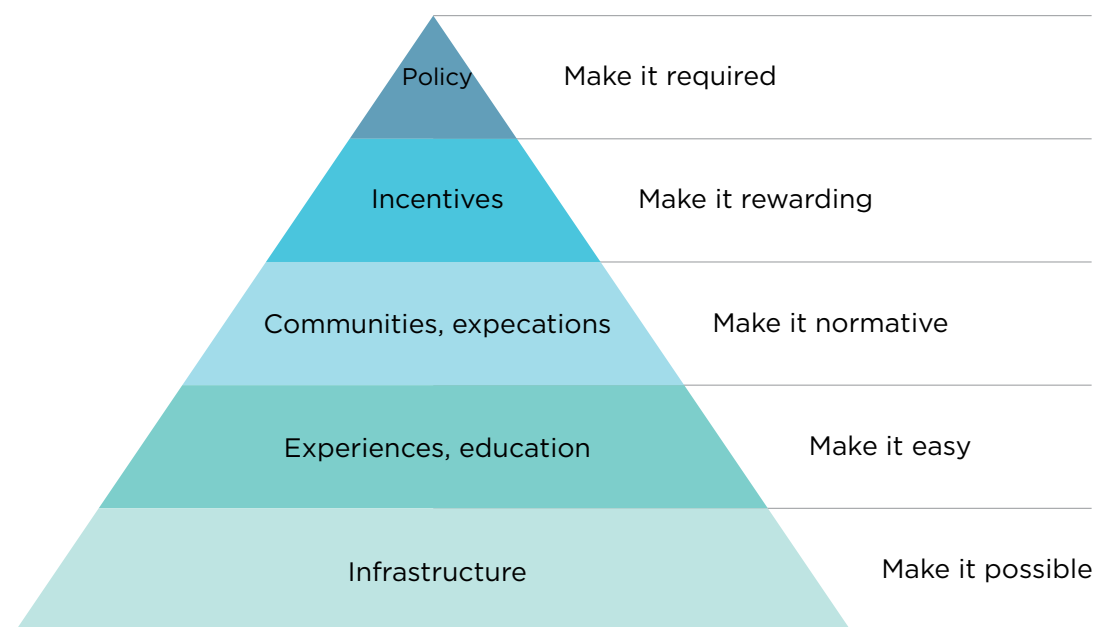


Behaviour change interventions

The level of behaviour change intervention is drawn from The Centre for Open Science's strategy for culture and behaviour change¹, which has 5 levels of intervention represented by the pyramid. These levels are progressive, reflecting the fact that successful implementation of higher levels depends on successful implementation of lower levels.

A focus on the individual's skills, motivation, and sense of self-efficacy is sometimes sufficient to change behaviour. But, the focus on the individual can miss a key barrier to change – the culture. People are embedded in social and cultural systems. Those systems shape behaviour by (1) communicating norms – this is what people do, this is what people should do, (2) providing incentives – this is what people are rewarded for doing, and (3) imposing policies – this is what you have to do to be part of this system.

Centre for Open Science: Strategy for culture and behaviour change¹



¹ Centre for Open Science, 2019. [Strategy for Culture Change](#)

Grant assessment criteria

Vision: NHMRC grant assessment criteria will embrace diverse research practices and activities, utilise appropriate metrics, and integrate evidence-based assessment criteria through a commitment to continuous improvement.

Focus area	Priority actions	Related ARRA commitment	Level of behaviour change intervention	Timeframe
Investigate opportunities to broaden the scope of research activities and outputs recognised in grant funding applications and assessments.	1. Identify opportunities to better align grant assessment criteria with the ARRA principles for assessment criteria and processes, and ARRA commitments.	1	Make it possible	Oct 2025 – 2026
	2. Explore how open research principles can be integrated into grant assessment criteria, including recognising a wide range of research contributions, impacts and outputs.	1	Make it possible	2027
	3. Review grant assessment criteria, tools and processes for each ongoing scheme every 5 years, to ensure that these are aligned with the principles and commitments of ARRA.	6	Make it possible	2026-2029
Improve supporting greater diversity in career paths and profiles through initiatives that support varied career trajectories and recognise diverse professional experiences.	4. Conduct a review of grant assessment criteria relating to information about researcher career history and identify opportunities to better recognise the diversity of career paths and profiles in research.	1	Make it possible	Oct 2025 –2026
	5. Investigate opportunities to reward researchers who demonstrate commitment to principles of responsible research assessment.	1	Make it rewarding	2027
	6. Explore evidence-informed qualitative evaluation mechanisms and tools to integrate into grant assessment criteria.	2	Make it possible	2028
	7. Explore ways to share qualitative approaches to demonstrating research achievements and impacts with the sector, to support broader assessment approaches.	2, 7 & 8	Make it easy	2030
Adhere to and endorse DORA principles by explicitly discouraging the use of inappropriate journal metrics in grant applications.	8. Evaluate how often applicants provide JIFs, even with guidance against it, to identify any need for process improvements.	3	Make it normative	2029
	9. Evaluate the use of quantitative indicators in applications and explore ways to ensure responsible use in the future.	3	Make it possible	2028

Peer review

Vision: NHMRCs peer review process will maintain the highest standards of quality, transparency, and inclusivity in scientific research.

Focus area	Priority actions	Related ARRA commitment	Level of behaviour change intervention	Timeframe
Commitment to enhancing and supporting the peer review process to ensure it remains robust, transparent and inclusive.	1. Review peer reviewer feedback to identify alignment with the ARRA, with the aim of improving guidance and training to applicants and peer reviewers.	2	Make it normative	2027
	2. Evaluation of support and training given to peer reviewers and applicants to identify opportunities for improvement and alignment.	6	Make it easy	2028
	3. Provide guidance and support to both peer reviewers and applicants.	7	Make it normative	Ongoing

Policies, procedures and guides

Vision: NHMRC policies, procedures, and guides will align with the ARRA commitments by embracing diverse research practices, using appropriate metrics, and integrating evidence-based criteria through a commitment to continuous improvement.

Focus area	Priority actions	Related ARRA commitment	Level of behaviour change intervention	Timeframe
Continued evaluation of research policies, tools and processes.	1. Conduct a review of relevant policies, procedures and guiding documents to assess how they align with ARRA and identify opportunities for improvement.	6	Make it easy	Oct 2025-2026
	2. Reinforce and expand guidance to Administering Institutions, applicants, and peer reviewers about appropriate uses of journal and publication-based metrics in grant applications and assessments.	3	Make it normative	Ongoing
	3. Explore opportunities to develop new policies and guiding documents to support responsible research assessment practices as required.	6	Make it possible	Ongoing

Supporting commitments

Vision: NHMRC will use a systematic evaluation process to develop, implement, and continuously enhance an action plan that strengthens operational support activities and fosters bidirectional communication with stakeholders.

Focus area	Priority actions	Related ARRA commitment	Level of behaviour change intervention	Timeframe
Develop , implement and monitor the action plan ensuring alignment with CoARA principles and NHMRC policies.	1. Allocate the necessary resources (e.g., staff capacity) to achieve the actions described in this action plan within the agreed timeframe.	5	Make it possible	Ongoing
Develop and implement strategies to exchange practices and foster the sharing of good practices in both national and international contexts.	2. Share learnings from advancing research assessment practices through engagement with CoARA working groups. Identify pathways to share learnings with the sector.	7 & 8	Make it normative	Ongoing
Ensure the transparent communication of our research evaluation processes both internally and externally.	3. Regularly and publicly communicate progress made on this action plan, sharing both successes and challenges, through appropriate venues, forums and mediums.	9	Make it normative	Ongoing
Establish a systematic approach to monitor and (re)evaluate its assessment criteria, tools, and processes.	4. Mapping and monitoring of developments in best practices in reforming research assessment through participation in CoARA events and working groups, and other relevant activities.	10	Make it easy	Ongoing
	5. Refresh this action plan every 5 years to ensure our approaches remain consistent with best practices.	10	Make it easy	Ongoing