



# Key changes to the Investigator Grants 2026 round

## Background

NHMRC continues to improve its policies and processes each funding round in response to feedback (via participants in NHMRC's grant program, peer reviewer surveys, RAO consultation, public consultations and from NHMRC's principal committees). Following consistent feedback, a range of updates aimed at improving NHMRC's eligibility and assessment framework are being implemented for the Investigator Grants 2026 round (see **Figure 1**).

## Key updates

### Research impact

- The 'Research impact and pathway to impact' assessment criteria has been revised following [NHMRC's review of its Research Impact Track Record Assessment \(RITRA\) framework](#), extensive consultation, and in cooperation with the [NHMRC Score Descriptor Working Group](#) (see Section 6 and [Appendix B](#)).
- Revisions include streamlining and simplifying the research impact assessment criteria, reducing 3 sub-criteria to 2:
  - 'Reach and significance' (10%)
  - 'Applicant's contribution to the impact' (10%).
- These revisions aim to reduce the overlap and confusion expressed in feedback from applicants and peer reviewers and shift the focus of the assessment to the contributions the applicant has made along a 'pathway to impact' (see [Appendix B](#)).

### Score descriptors

- Following consistent sector feedback, the score descriptor tables have been revised and reformatted to include greater detail at each description, to better support peer reviewers to understand the expectations of applicants at each score (see [Appendix B](#)).
- Performance indicators have been included at [Appendix B](#), to sit 'above' the score descriptor tables. The indicators can be used together with the score descriptors to further understand what is expected of applicants at each score. They provide peer reviewers with descriptions that address 3 broad 'elements' of independent assessment (quality of the proposed research, the potential for impact, and the demonstrated capability of the applicant). It is not mandatory that peer reviewers use these indicators, they are designed to provide additional support where necessary/appropriate.

## Statements of Expectations

- Given mixed feedback on NHMRC's proposal to remove the 10-year post PhD eligibility barrier for Emerging Leadership (EL) applicants following public consultation, NHMRC will not be implementing this change for the 2026 round. Instead, the Statements of Expectations (SoEs) have been updated to better support applicants to make the best decision regarding which Level to apply for, and for peer reviewers to assess the appropriateness of that selection. Since they were updated in 2021, NHMRC data indicates that the SoEs have been effective at supporting CIs and peer reviewers to understand the most appropriate Level for CIs to apply.
- These updates also highlight for prospective applicants that there is no evidence that applicants who apply 'down' to a Level with less senior researchers are more successful than researchers applying as 'expected' (based on year's post-PhD – adjusted for career disruptions).

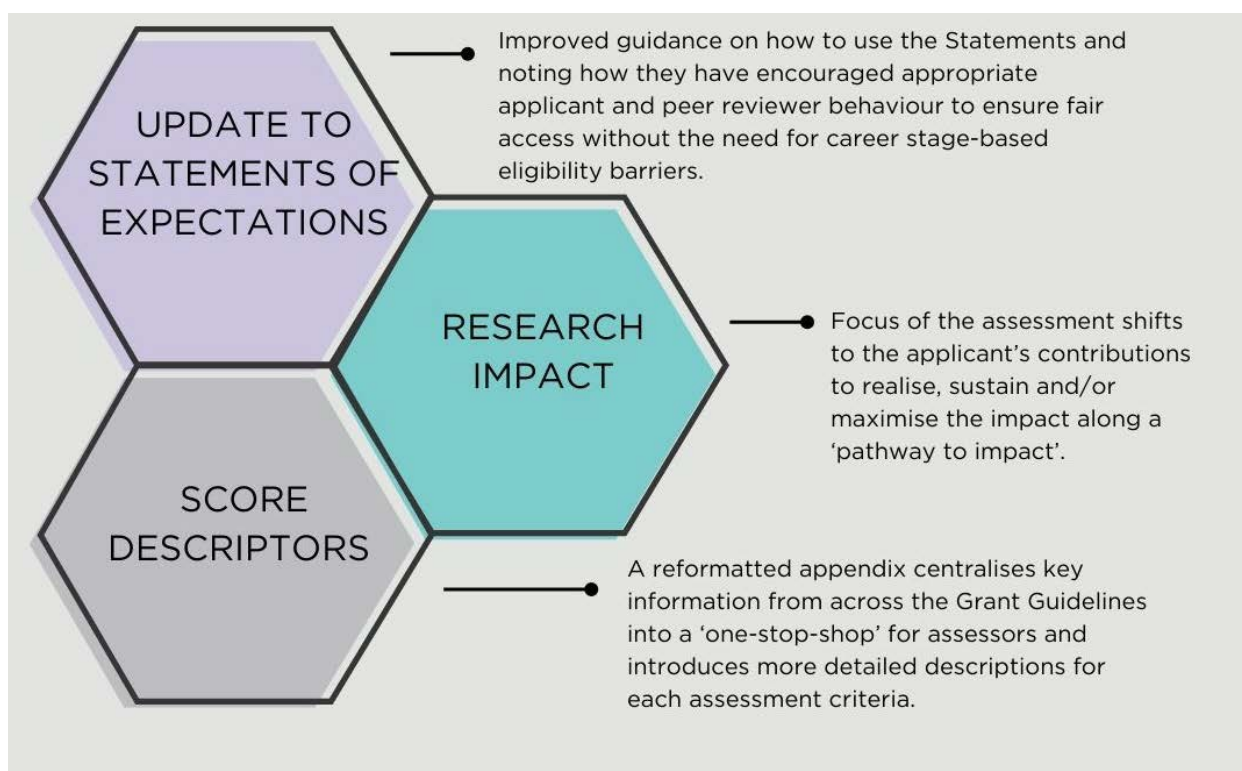
## Leadership

- The 'Leadership' criterion has been streamlined to simplify the assessment. Applicants are no longer required to provide responses to each of the 4 Leadership elements. Instead, applicants will provide a single leadership narrative that highlights their best leadership examples, framed against one or more of the 4 leadership elements, in a single text field (see Appendix B).

## Knowledge gain

- The 'Knowledge gain' criterion has been updated to improve the clarity of the assessment. Applicants are asked to make a clear distinction between their broad 5-year vision/plan and the 'proposed new research' they intend to carry out with the Investigator Grant (see Appendix B).

**Figure 1:** Key changes to the Investigator Grants 2026 round



## Key initiative

### Research impact



## Current (2025)

3 sub-criteria

- Reach and significance (7%)
- Research program's contribution to impact (6%)
- Applicant's contribution to research program (7%).

CIA addresses 3 subcriteria in a single text field with an additional text field for references/evidence.

## Changes (2026)

2 sub-criteria:

- Reach and significance (10%)
- Applicant's contribution to impact (10%).

CIA addresses 2 sub-criteria in a single text field, providing a single coherent narrative of their contribution to realising, sustaining, and/or maximising their claimed research impact. An additional field for references/evidence.

## Rationale

NHMRC's [RITRA Framework Evaluation Report](#) found the Research impact criteria was not achieving it's intended objectives to encourage translation for improved health. The updated assessment criteria have been developed with the assistance of the [NHMRC score descriptor working group](#) and were informed by feedback from a public consultation held in November 2024. The updated assessment criteria simplify the assessment, removing duplication and overlap. It also allows applicants from all research areas and career stages to provide a compelling narrative of contributions they have made along a pathway to impact.

### Score descriptor index



Consolidated in 2025 to become a 'one stop shop' for peer reviewers with key assessment information included in a single appendix.

Score descriptor tables have been reformatted to make them easier to read, and more detail included at each description to better differentiate applications. Performance indicators have been introduced.

Consistent feedback from Investigator Grant peer reviewers has indicated that more detailed score descriptors would better support them in determining appropriate scores for CIs against each assessment criteria, particularly in the absence of grant review panels/peer-to-peer contact. The performance indicators have been introduced to sit above the score descriptors, providing general advice around the attributes expected at each score, and are designed to supplement the score descriptors as required by peer reviewers.

### Statement of expectations



Last updated in 2021.

Clarity provided on how to consider the elements of the SoEs *holistically*, with less emphasis on years post PhD or academic level.

It is clear from sector feedback that some reviewers may be over-emphasising years post-PhD pass date and appointable academic level when considering the most appropriate Level for an CI. The updated SoEs advise CIs and reviewers that the CI's responsibilities and research experience should be the guiding factor, but that all elements need to be considered together.