Public consultation feedback evaluation report

NHMRC Investigator Grant scheme

Initiative 1 – Research impact assessment update

Initiative 2 – Score descriptor appendix updates

Initiative 3 – Removing the Emerging Leadership (EL) eligibility barrier

March 2025

Contents

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Background

NHMRC established a working group (the Working Group) in early 2024 to provide advice about potential updates to research impact criteria and score descriptors. The proposed updates were informed by sector feedback received over several years, recommendations from the Research Impact Track Record Assessment (RITRA) evaluation report, and discussions with the Health Research Impact Committee (HRIC), which considered potential avenues for improving the RITRA framework.

Supported by the advice from the Working Group, NHMRC conducted a public consultation in November 2024 to seek the sector's comment and input on the proposed changes.

This report provides a summary of feedback received from the public consultation undertaken between 6 November – 9 December 2024, which proposed the following changes to NHMRC's assessment framework:

1. updates to the Investigator and Synergy Grant score descriptors
2. revised research impact assessment criteria
3. the removal of the Emerging Leadership 10-year post-PhD eligibility barrier.

Consultation approach

The proposed changes were published on NHMRC's consultation hub, Citizen Space. An RAO alert was sent to notify institutions to complete a survey comprising a mixture of Likert scale questions and free text response fields. To increase the likelihood of receiving a full breadth of views, NHMRC also invited targeted key stakeholders to participate via email. These stakeholders were chosen based on their industry expertise, their range of involvement in research impact as well as institutions lead by Indigenous researchers and research within the Indigenous community.

During the survey period, 288 respondents submitted feedback. Analysis of the survey results took the form of descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis by NHMRC staff of the free text provided by survey respondents. In parallel with this analysis, a second analysis was conducted using Microsoft's AI-generative tool, Copilot. Prompts including 'temperature' checks to ascertain the overall mood of responses, and requests for key themes raised in free text responses. The findings from Copilot were consistent with the analysis conducted by staff and provided in this report.

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Executive summary

The overall findings from the public consultation are illustrated below, with strong support for some key changes. Useful insight was captured about areas that could be further strengthened.

Support for introducing the concept of the applicant's contribution along a 'pathway to impact.'

'Pathway to impact' concept is mostly clear.

Divided on whether applicants from all research areas and career stages could provide a compelling narrative of their contribution to the impact.
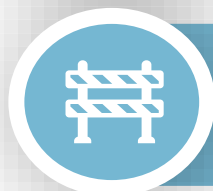
Support for the proposed weighting of the 2 research impact sub-criteria.

Support for the revised score descriptor appendix.

Support regarding the revised score descriptor tables' ability to better assist peer reviewers to differentiate between applicants/scores.

Divided on whether the EL 10-year post-PhD pass date eligibility barrier should be removed.

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All participants were invited to provide basic demographic information to assist with the analysis. This information was used throughout the analyses to provide additional context to the answers provided.

Demographic Question 1

Are you an Australian or international stakeholder?

- Australian

- International

Figure 1.   Distribution of Australian versus international respondents

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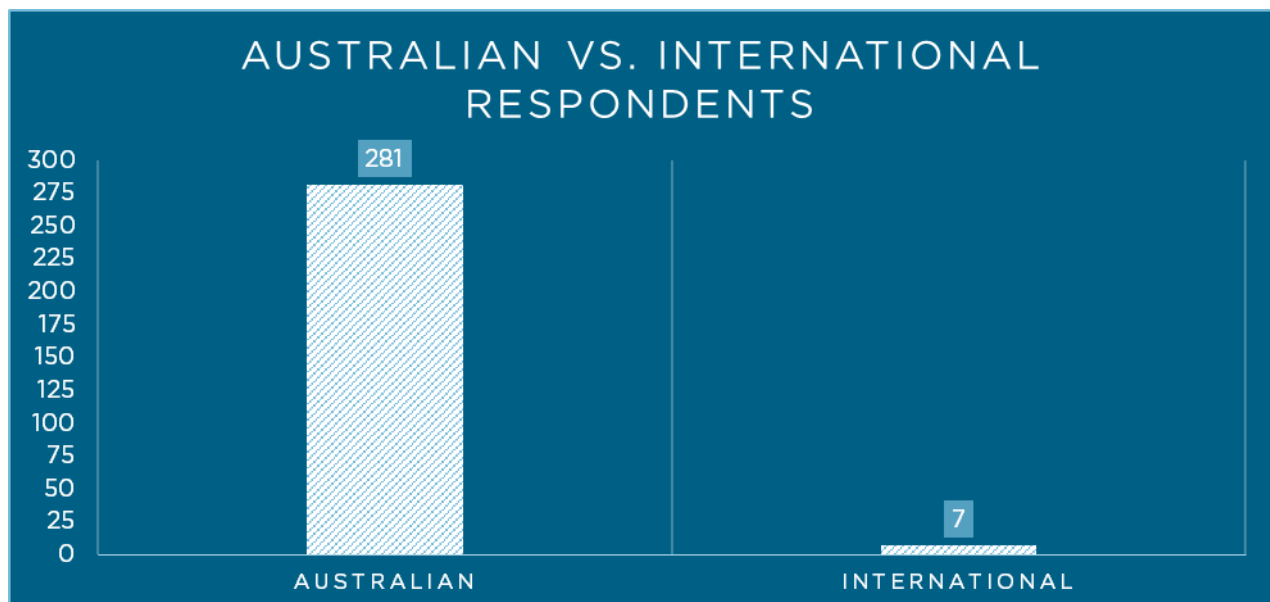
Demographic Question 2

Please identify if this submission is from an individual or an organisation:

- Individual
- Organisation

If from an organisation, please specify.

- University
- Medical research institute
- Not for profit
- For-profit/Private
- Hospital/health service provider
- Government – Commonwealth
- Government – State/Territory

Figure 2. Distribution of individual versus organisation respondents

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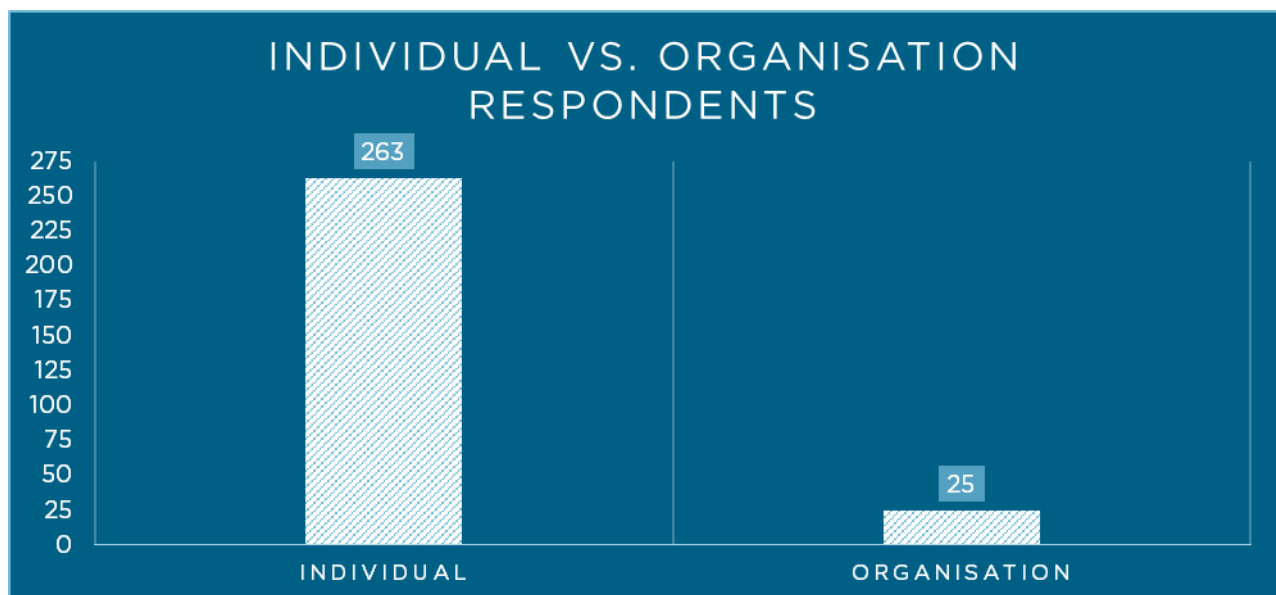
Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by organisation Type

RESPONDENTS BY ORGANISATION TYPE

Organisation Type	Value
UNIVERSITY	25
MEDICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE	24
NOT FOR PROFIT	6
FOR-PROFIT/PRIVATE	3
HOSPITAL/HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDER	0
GOVERNMENT – COMMONWEALTH	0
GOVERNMENT – STATE/TERRITORY	0
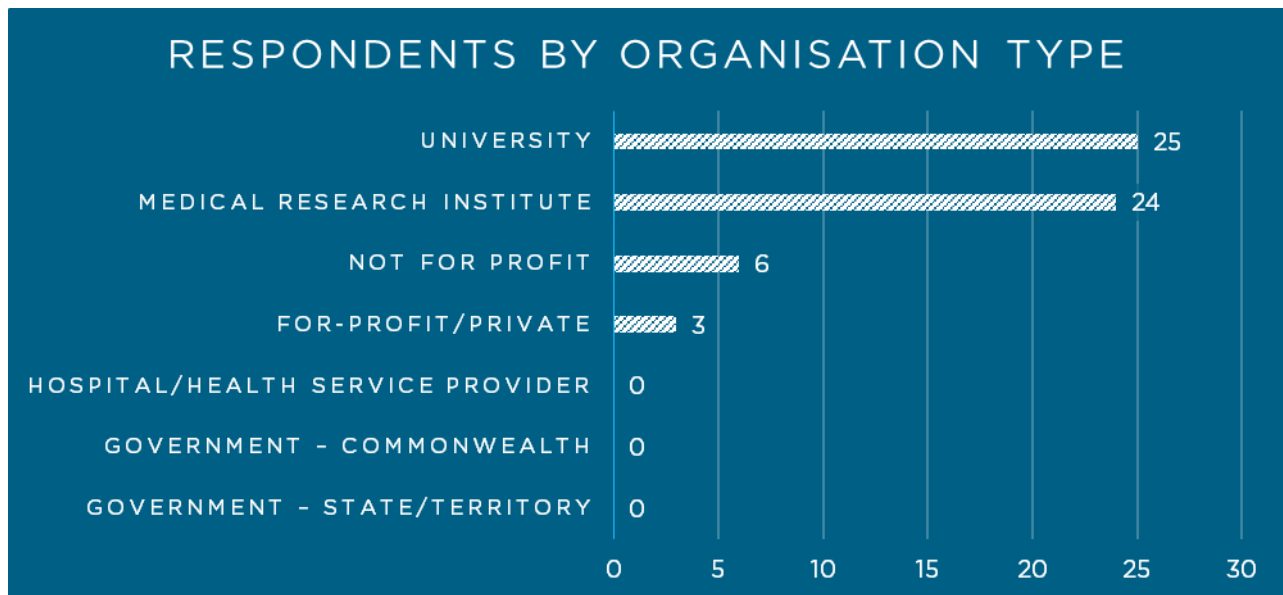
Demographic Question 3

What best describes your role/area within your institution?

- Researcher
- Senior administrator/Institutional leader
- Research administrator
- Other
- Research student

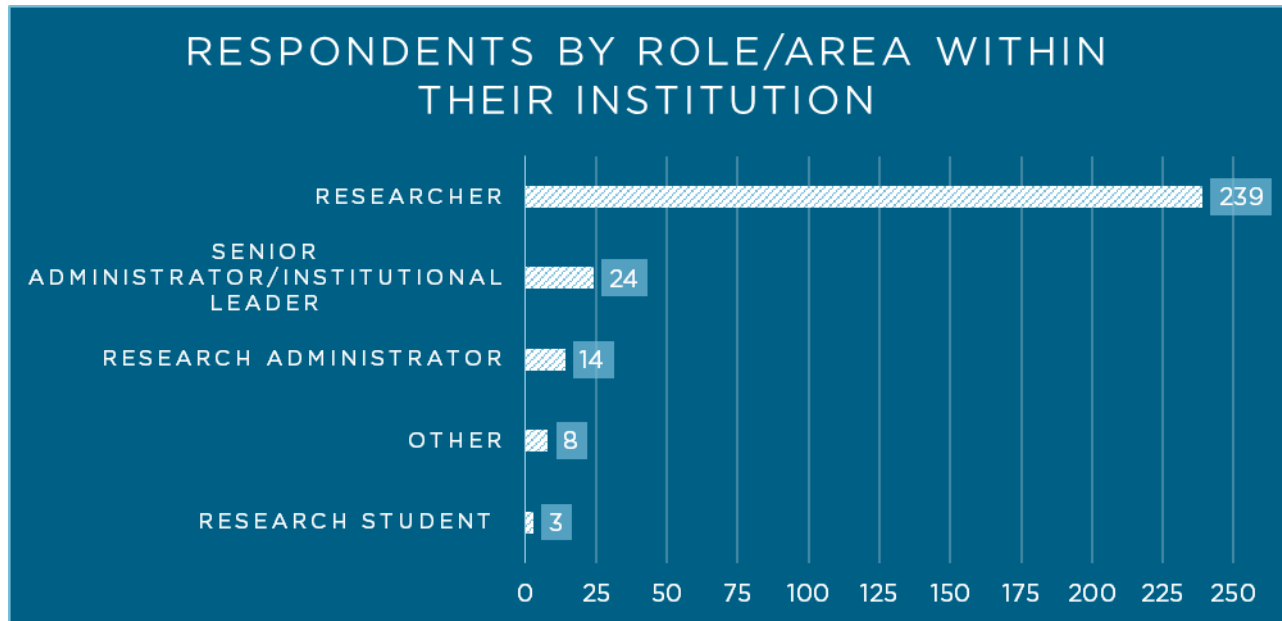If other, please specify

- Free text response

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Figure 4. Distribution of respondents by role/area within their institution

RESPONDENTS BY ROLE/AREA WITHIN THEIR INSTITUTION

- RESEARCHER — 239
- SENIOR ADMINISTRATOR/INSTITUTIONAL LEADER — 24
- RESEARCH ADMINISTRATOR — 14
- OTHER — 8
- RESEARCH STUDENT — 3

Of the respondents who indicated 'other', examples of free text responses included:

- Impact Expert and Research Impact Officer
- Research Impact Communication Specialist with the Research Impact Academy
- Chair, Emerging Leaders Committee
- Researcher development professional.

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Demographic Question 4

Have you participated in peer review for an NHMRC scheme?

- Yes

- No

If 'Yes', which NHMRC scheme did you peer review?

- Investigator Grant Scheme

- Synergy Grant Scheme

- Ideas Grant Scheme

Other

If 'Yes', when was the last time you participated in peer review for an NHMRC scheme?

- Less than 12 months

- More than 12 months ago

- 2 or more years ago

We sought to understand the respondents' familiarity with NHMRC's peer review processes and current or previous documentation to determine whether it influenced their perspectives on the proposed updates.

Figure 5. Distribution of respondents who have or have not participated in peer review for an NHMRC scheme

RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE OR HAVE NOT PARTICIPATED IN PEER REVIEW FOR AN NHMRC SCHEME
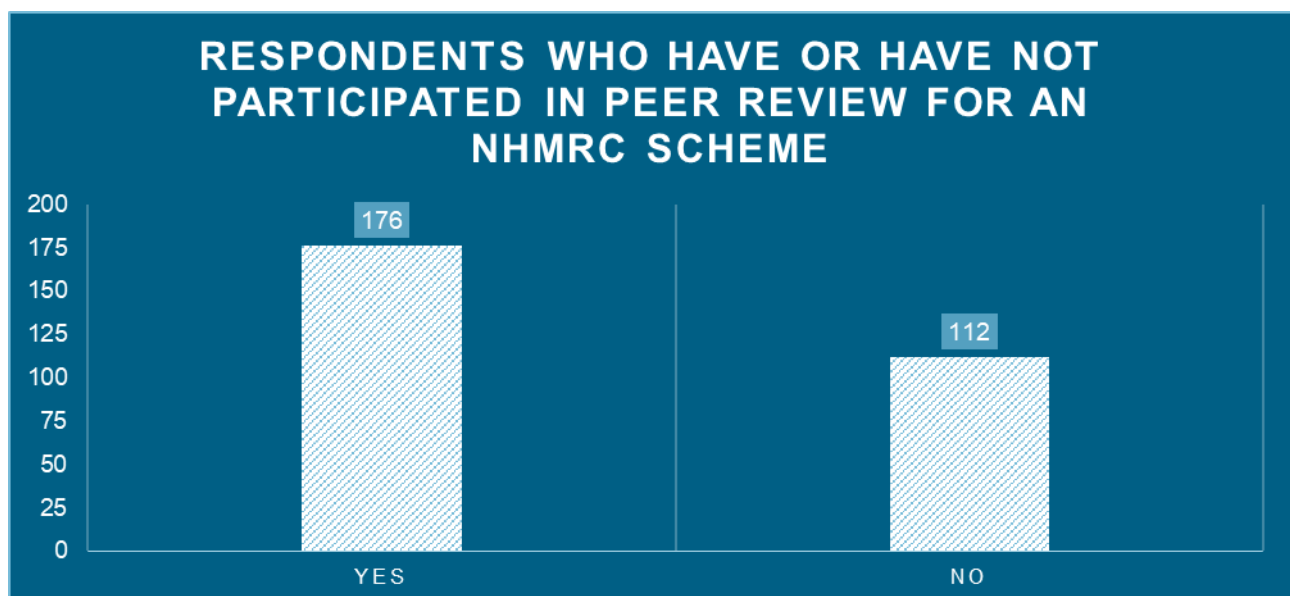
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Figure 6. Distribution of respondents who have peer reviewed by NHMRC scheme
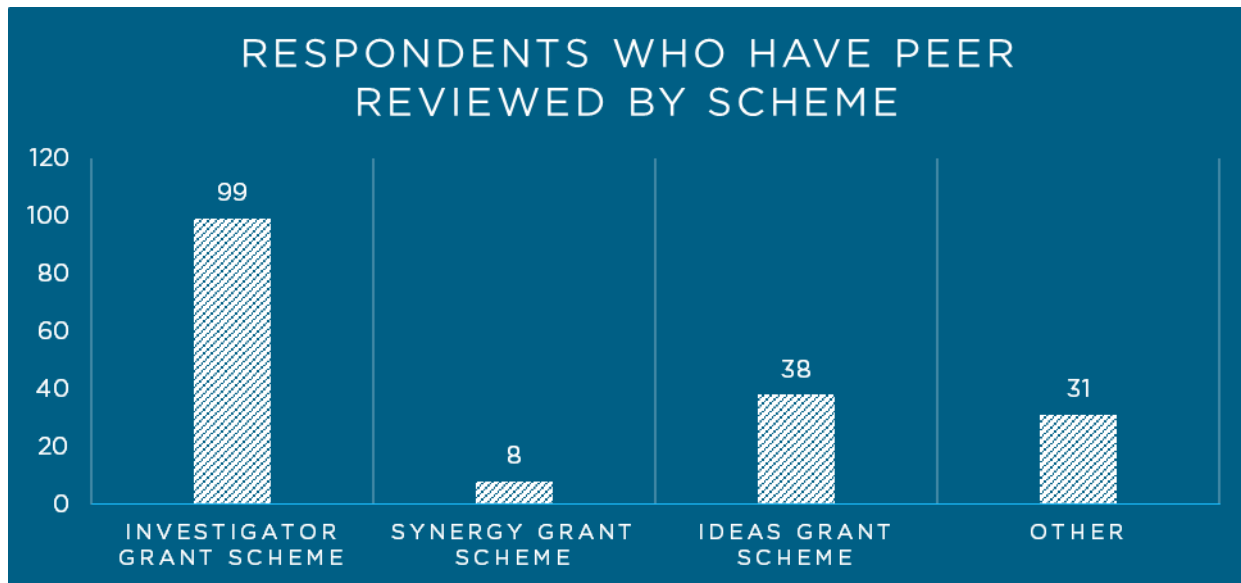
Figure 7. Distribution of respondents by last peer review participation

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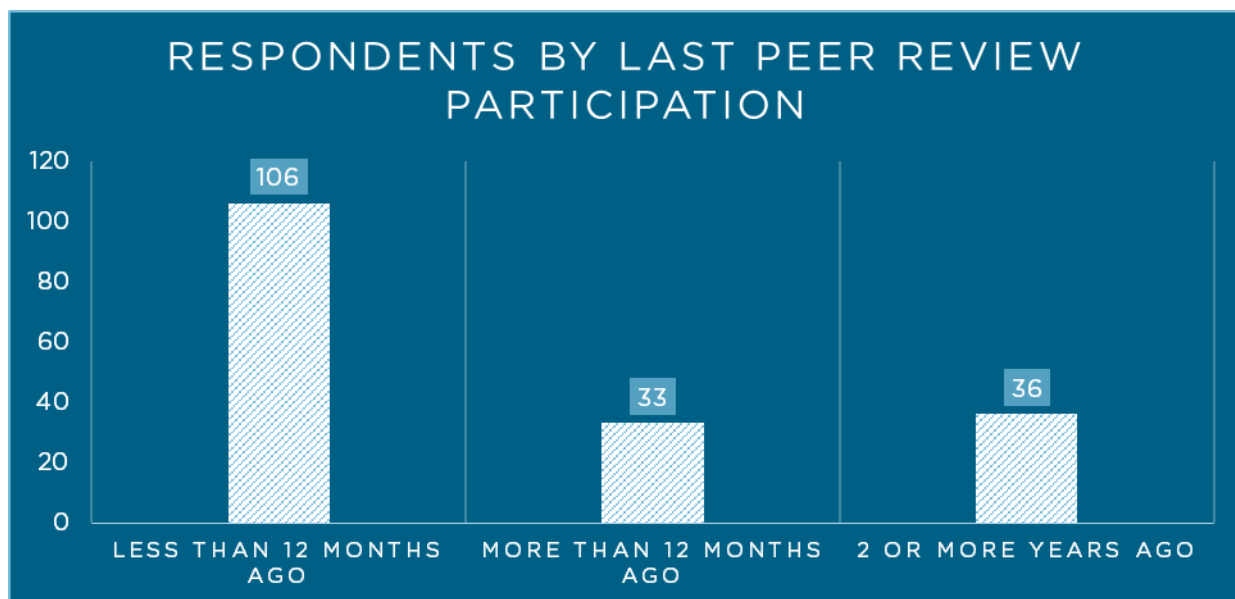
Demographic Question 5

What is your primary research background?

- Free text response

There were 269 free text responses to this question. The responses were varied and captured a broad range of primary research backgrounds (see **Table 1** and **Table 2**).

Table 1.   Distribution of respondents by basic research area (where provided)

Basic research area	Percentage
Basic Science Research	52%
Clinical Medicine and Science Research	29%
Public Health Research	17%
Health Services Research	2%

Table 2.   Top 5 Research specialties

Research specialty	No. of responses	Percentage
Public health and epidemiology	39	30%
Cancer	34	26%
Immunology	21	16%
Genetics	19	15%
Basic sciences	17	13%

Public Consultation (Initiative #1) – Research impact assessment update

The first part of the public consultation aimed to capture stakeholders' perspectives on the proposed concept of the applicant's contribution along a 'pathway to impact'. Survey respondents were provided the updated research impact assessment developed in consultation with the Working Group and invited to provide feedback on the concepts and appropriateness (see **Appendix A**). Respondents were not required to answer all questions in the survey.

To ensure clarity and ease of interpretation, the category 'support' in some figures refers to respondents who strongly agreed or agreed, and 'oppose' refers to those who strongly disagreed or disagreed.

Research Impact Question 1

To what extent do you agree or not agree with the following statements (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree):

a) I support introducing the concept of the applicant's contribution along a 'pathway to impact'.

b) I believe the 'pathway to impact' concept is clear.

c) I believe applicants from all research areas will be able to provide a compelling narrative of their contribution to the impact.

If you disagree, please elaborate (free text responses)

There were 263 responses to this question. Key findings were (further illustrated in **Table 3**):

- There was support for introducing the concept of the applicant's contribution along a 'pathway to impact', with 65% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing.

- There was broad agreement that the 'pathway to impact' concept is clear, with only 19% of respondents strongly disagreeing or disagreeing.

- Respondents were divided on whether applicants from all research areas could provide a compelling narrative of their contribution to the impact, with 40% of respondents in support (those who strongly agreed or agreed) and 36% who opposed (those who strongly disagreed or disagreed).

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Table 3. Percentage distribution of responses to Research Impact Question 1

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q1a. I support introducing the concept of the applicant's contribution along a 'pathway to impact'.				
45	126	43	29	20
Q1b. I believe the 'pathway to impact' concept is clear.				
16	104	60	49	33
Q1c. I believe applicants from all research areas will be able to provide a compelling narrative of their contribution to the impact.				
22	82	64	59	36

Responses to Question 1a, 'I support introducing the concept of the applicant's contribution along a 'pathway to impact'', were relatively consistent between individuals and organisations, as well as between respondents who had peer reviewed for a NHMRC scheme and those who had not.

Responses to Question 1b, 'I believe the 'pathway to impact' concept is clear'', illustrate that there was greater support from organisations compared to individual respondents (see **Figure 8)**. Responses were relatively consistent between respondents who peer reviewed for a NHMRC scheme and those who had not.

Figure 8. Percentage distribution of organisational versus individual responses to Question 1b
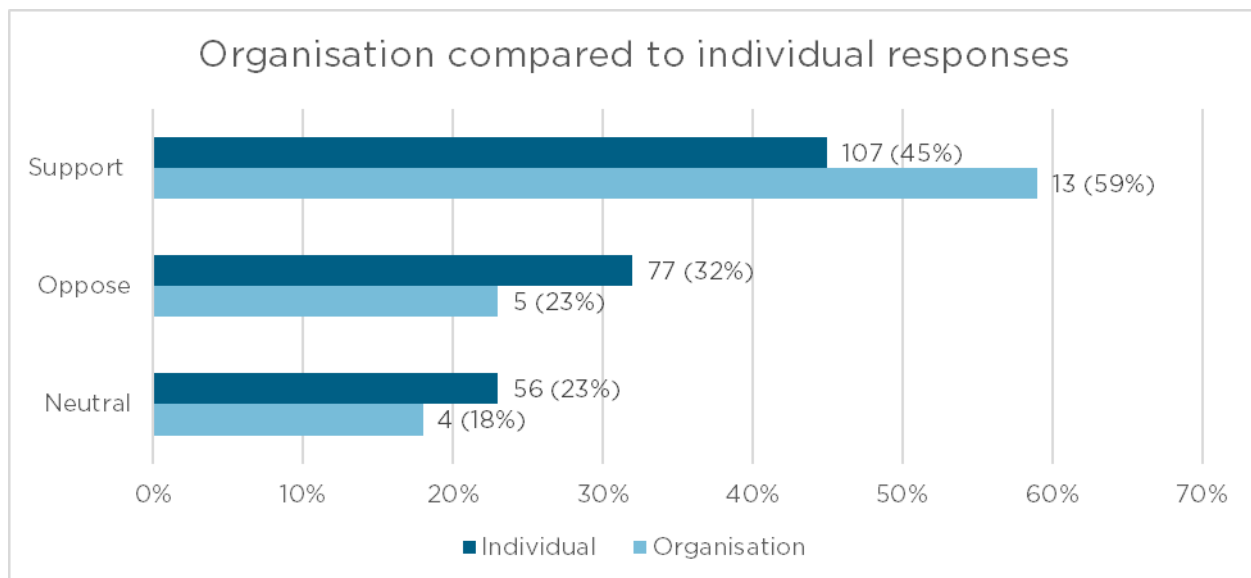
Responses to Question 1c, 'I believe applicants from all research areas will be able to provide a compelling narrative of their contribution to the impact', were relatively consistent between individuals and organisations, as well as between respondents who peer reviewed for a NHMRC scheme and those who had not.

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There were 93 free text responses to the Research Impact Question 1, 'If you disagree, please elaborate'. Review of the responses indicated that 60% of the feedback contained positive elements, as highlighted by 3 respondents:

"We agree with including "Pathway to Impact" as part of the assessment for Research Impact, as it acknowledges the valuable research contributions (e.g., findings and outcomes) and individual efforts that underpin the journey toward achieving impact."

"We welcome removing the restriction to referencing one research program. The concept of 'pathway to impact' is welcomed."

"I agree that there needs to be more clarity as to what researchers can claim as a valuable contribution during a more broadly defined "pathway to impact"."

Concerns were noted and clustered into 4 categories, as illustrated in **Figure 9**. While categories were presented as discrete, responses could align with more than one theme.

Figure 9.   Key concerns raised by respondents
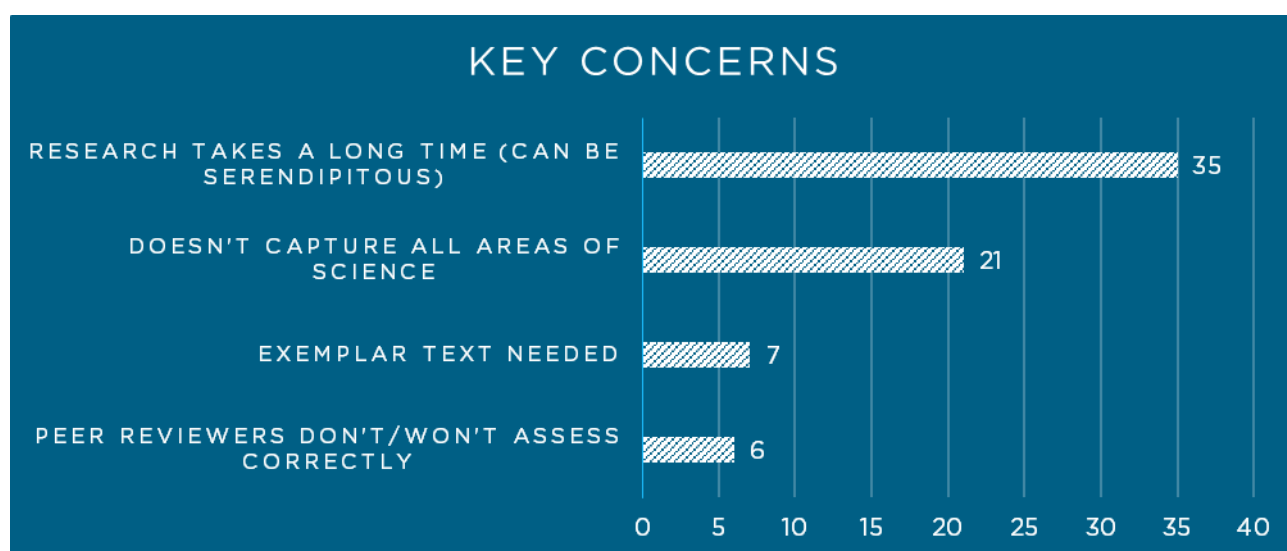
The greatest concern identified in free text responses at Question 1 was that research takes a long time and can be serendipitous. As highlighted by 2 respondents:

"What pathway to impact did the invention of PCR have? There are numerous examples of serendipity leading to phenomenal discoveries, in which impact was never envisioned"

"A pathway to impact is predicated on there being a linear increase in impact. Impact is not something that can be measured in a small quantum of time (i.e. 5 yearly). Some research takes many years to have an impact and as such may not be immediately relevant but may indeed become so once other information is acquired."

Research Impact Question 2

Do you agree with the proposed equal weighting of the 2 research impact sub-criteria ('Reach and significance' (10%) and 'Applicant's contribution to the impact' (10%))?

- Yes

- No

If no, what combination would you prefer (must add up to 20%)

- Free text response

There were 262 responses to the statement, 'do you agree with the proposed equal weighting of the 2 research impact sub-criteria ('Reach and significance' (10%) and 'Applicant's contribution to the impact' (10%))?'. There was support for the proposed weighting of the 2 new research impact sub-criteria (see **Table 4**).

Table 4.   Percentage distribution of responses to Research Impact Question 3

Yes	No
79%	21%

There were 59 free text responses to the statement 'if no, what combination would you prefer (must add up to 20%). The majority of these respondents (32 respondents) were in favour of assigning a greater weight to 'Applicant's contribution to the impact'. Other concerns raised included:

- 'Applicant's contribution to the impact' and 'Reach and significance' varies between research areas and career stages
- Peer reviewer assessment of 'Applicant's contribution to the impact' and 'Reach and significance' would be subjective.

Research Impact Question 3

Do you have any other comments on the proposed research impact assessment criteria update?

There were 93 free text responses. There was a large number of free-text responses that provided positive feedback (44% of responses), as highlighted by 2 respondents:

"This is an improvement on the current impact criteria and weighting."

"I think it's great. It simplifies things a great deal and is probably more in line with how many reviewers are considering applications in any case."

Positive feedback was clustered into 3 categories, as illustrated in **Figure 10**.

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Figure 10. Key positive feedback raised by respondents

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

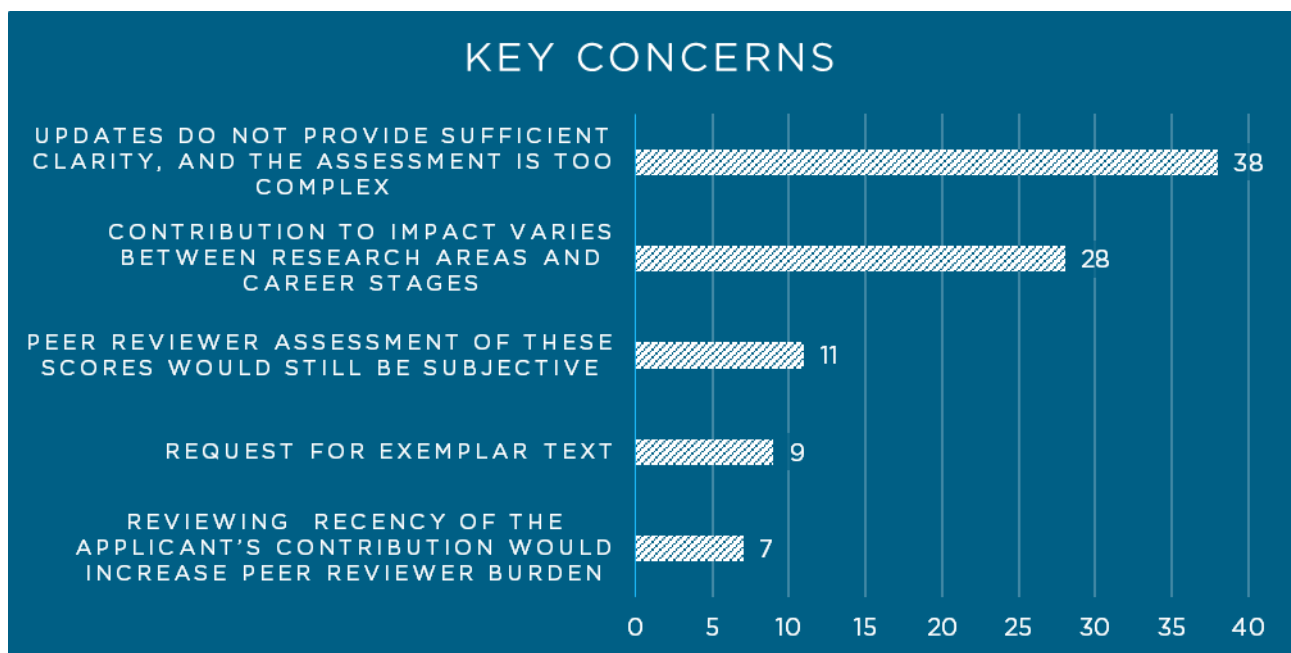|	
THE UPDATES PROVIDE CLARITY AND REDUCE ASSESSMENT COMPLEXITY AND SUBJECTIVITY	15
EQUAL WEIGHTING WILL ASSIST PEER REVIEWER ASSESSMENT BY REDUCING AMBIGUITY	10
'PATHWAY TO IMPACT' ALLOWS APPLICANTS TO SHOWCASE THEIR PROGRESS	6
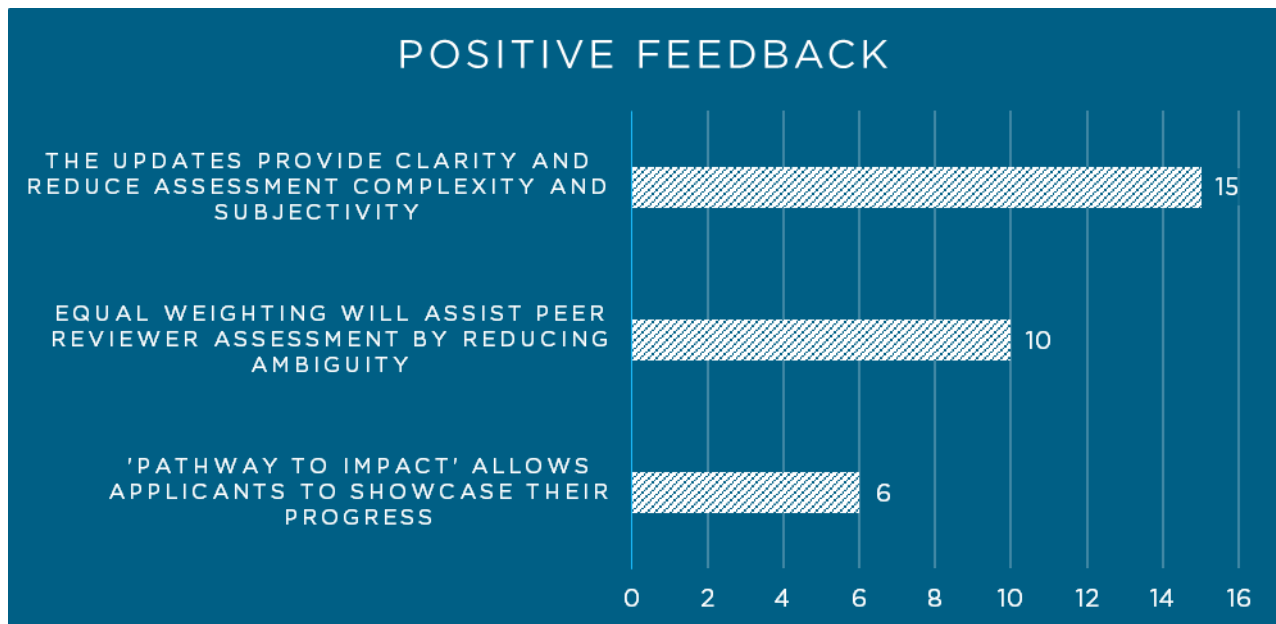
Concerns clustered into 5 themes, as illustrated in **Figure 11**. Some responses aligned with more than one theme.

Figure 11. Key concerns raised by respondents to Research Impact Question 3

KEY CONCERNS

UPDATES DO NOT PROVIDE SUFFICIENT CLARITY, AND THE ASSESSMENT IS TOO COMPLEX	38
CONTRIBUTION TO IMPACT VARIES BETWEEN RESEARCH AREAS AND CAREER STAGES	28
PEER REVIEWER ASSESSMENT OF THESE SCORES WOULD STILL BE SUBJECTIVE	11
REQUEST FOR EXEMPLAR TEXT	9
REVIEWING RECENCY OF THE APPLICANT'S CONTRIBUTION WOULD INCREASE PEER REVIEWER BURDEN	7

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Public Consultation (Initiative #2) – Score descriptor appendix updates

This second part of the consultation aimed to capture stakeholders' perspectives on the proposed updates to the score descriptor appendix. Survey respondents were provided with the updated version of the appendix and invited to provide feedback on appropriateness and usefulness (see **Appendix B**). Respondents were not required to answer all questions in the survey.

To ensure clarity and ease of interpretation, the category 'support' in several figures refers to respondents who strongly agreed or agreed, and 'oppose' refers to those who strongly disagreed or disagreed.

Score Descriptor Question 1

To what extent do you agree or not agree with the following statements (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree):

a) The revised score descriptor appendix will be a useful tool for applicants and peer reviewers.

b) The revised score descriptor tables will better assist peer reviewers to differentiate between applicants/scores.

If you disagree with any of the above, or have further suggestions, please specify (free text responses)

There were 251 respondents. As shown in **Table 5**:

- There was support for the revised score descriptor appendix, with 68% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing

- Respondents were generally supportive of the revised score descriptor tables' ability to better assist peer reviewers to differentiate between applicants/scores, with 59% strongly agreeing or agreeing.

Table 5.   Percentage distribution of responses to Score Descriptor Question 1

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1a. The revised score descriptor appendix will be a useful tool for applicants and peer reviewers.				
36	134	63	11	6
1b. The revised score descriptor tables will better assist peer reviewers to differentiate between applicants/scores.				
34	113	76	22	3

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Responses to Question 1a, 'The revised score descriptor appendix will be a useful tool for applicants and peer reviewers.', illustrate that there was greater support from organisations (with no organisations indicating they had a 'strong disagreement' to the updated appendix) compared to individual respondents (see **Figure 12)**. Responses were relatively consistent between respondents who peer reviewed for a NHMRC scheme and those who had not. Additionally, there was consistently at all demographics more respondents who were neutral to the question than those who opposed.

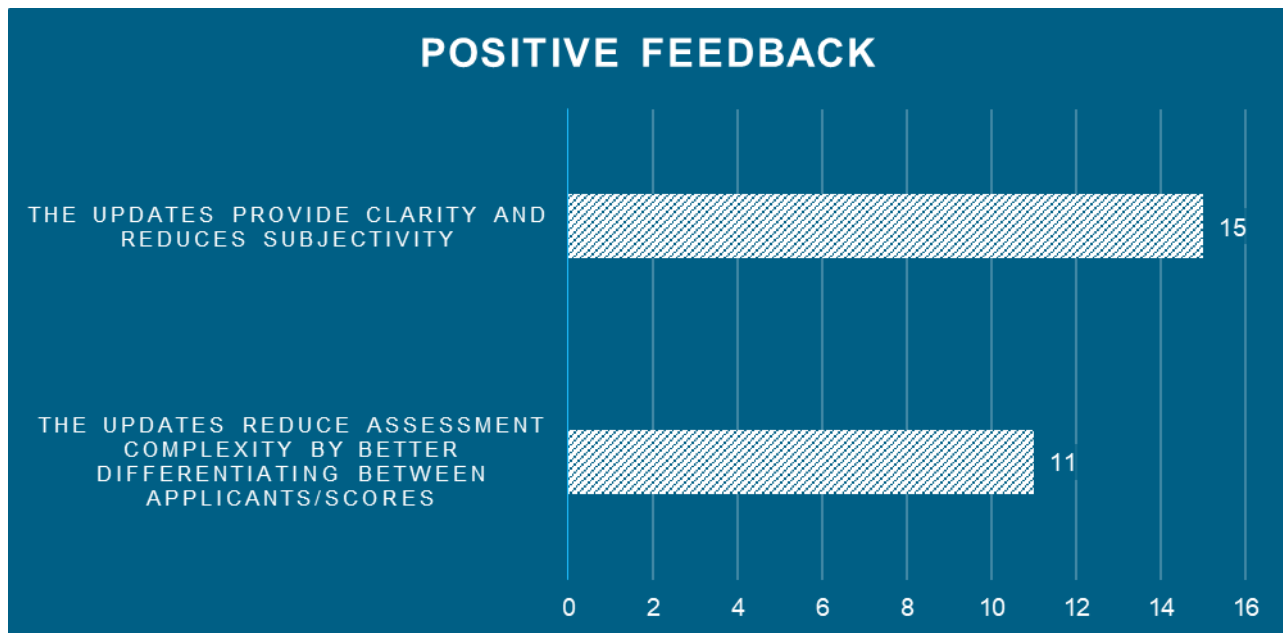**Figure 12.**   Organisation compared to individual responses to Score Descriptor Question 1a
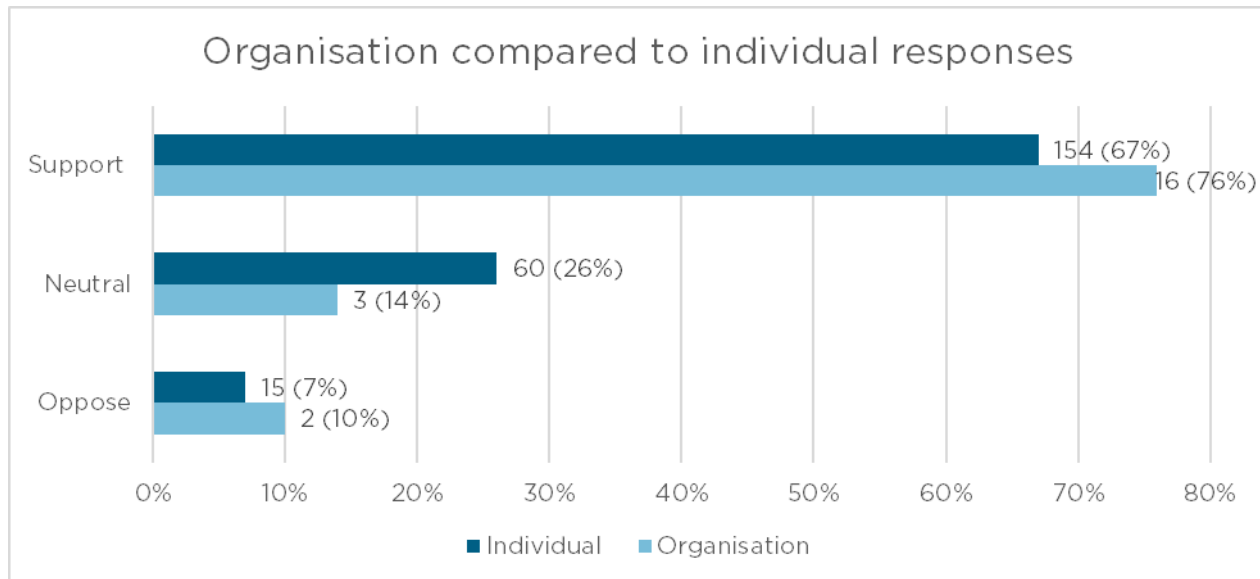
There were 62 free text responses to the statement 'if you disagree with any of the above, or have further suggestions, please specify'. Among these, 28 responses (45%) provided positive feedback, as highlighted by 2 respondents:

"The revised tables look good and seem to be written in language that better reflects how I assess applications."

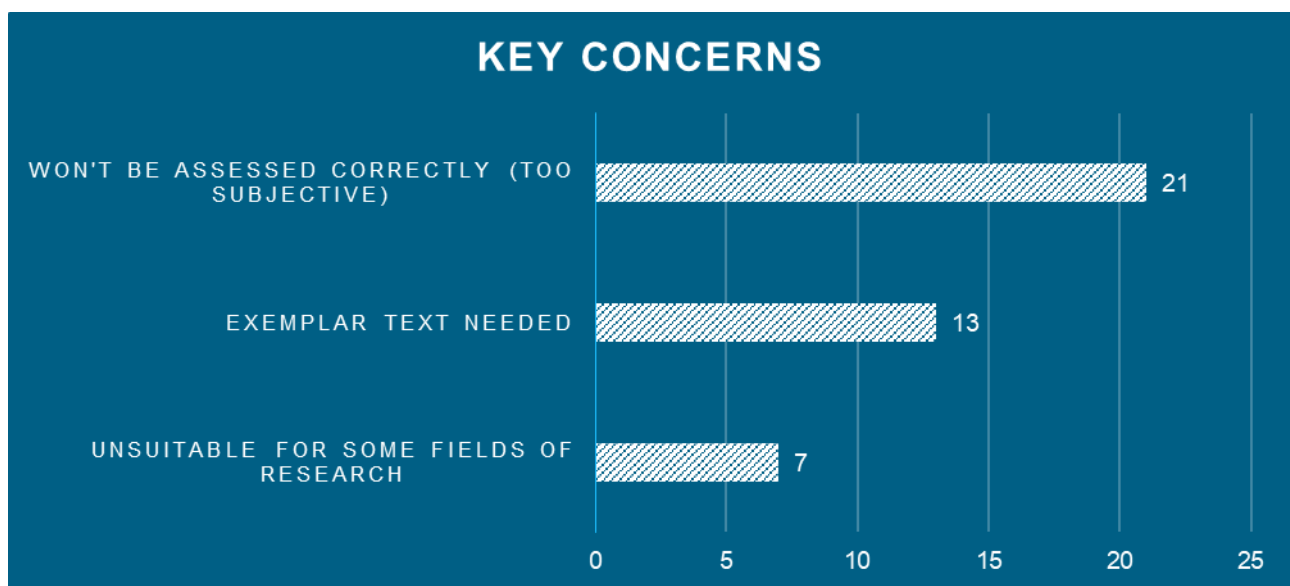*"The revised score descriptors are an improvement…"*

Positive feedback was clustered into 2 categories, as illustrated in **Figure 13**.

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Figure 13. Key positive feedback raised by respondents to Score Descriptors Question 1a

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

THE UPDATES PROVIDE CLARITY AND REDUCES SUBJECTIVITY — 15

THE UPDATES REDUCE ASSESSMENT COMPLEXITY BY BETTER DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN APPLICANTS/SCORES — 11

(x-axis: 0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16)

Concerns clustered into 3 themes, as illustrated in **Figure 14**. Some responses aligned with more than one concern.

Figure 14. Key concerns raised by respondents to Score Descriptors Question 1a

KEY CONCERNS

WON'T BE ASSESSED CORRECTLY (TOO SUBJECTIVE) — 21

EXEMPLAR TEXT NEEDED — 13

UNSUITABLE FOR SOME FIELDS OF RESEARCH — 7

(x-axis: 0 5 10 15 20 25)

The greatest concern identified in free text responses was that peer reviewers will not assess correctly. As highlighted by 2 respondents:

"I believe that some of the descriptors (such as a reliance on terms such as 'important', very important' etc. are highly subjective and difficult to benchmark appropriately."

"Many of the descriptors are still very subjective – exceptional, extremely, significant etc. - which makes assessing applications more difficult than it needs to be."

Public Consultation (Initiative #3) – Removing the Emerging Leadership (EL) eligibility barrier

This final part of the consultation sought to capture stakeholders' perspectives on removing the Emerging Leadership (EL) 10-year post-PhD pass date eligibility barrier. Survey respondents were presented material on the proposed change and invited to provide feedback on value and implications of removing EL eligibility barrier. Respondents were not required to answer all questions in the survey.

To ensure clarity and ease of interpretation, the category 'support' in several figures refers to respondents who strongly agreed or agreed, and 'oppose' refers to those who strongly disagreed or disagreed.

EL Eligibility Barrier Question 1

I support removing the Emerging Leadership 10-year post-PhD pass date eligibility barrier:

There were 286 responses.

Responses submitted to Question 1 demonstrate that the sector is divided on whether to implement these changes. There were 132 responses that supported (47%) the implementation and 128 responses that opposed (45%), while 22 responses remained neutral (8%) (see **Table 6**).

Responses submitted by individuals (not institutions), across the sector were divided on whether the EL 10-year post-PhD pass date eligibility barrier should be removed, with 122 (43%) in support (strongly agree or agree) and 129 (46%) opposed (strongly disagree or disagree) (see **Figure 15**). However, at an organisational level, there was more support for the update, as illustrated in **Figure 16**.

Table 6.   Percentage distribution of responses to Eligibility Barrier Question 1

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
75	57	22	47	81

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Figure 15. Percentage distribution of overall responses to Eligibility Barrier Question 1
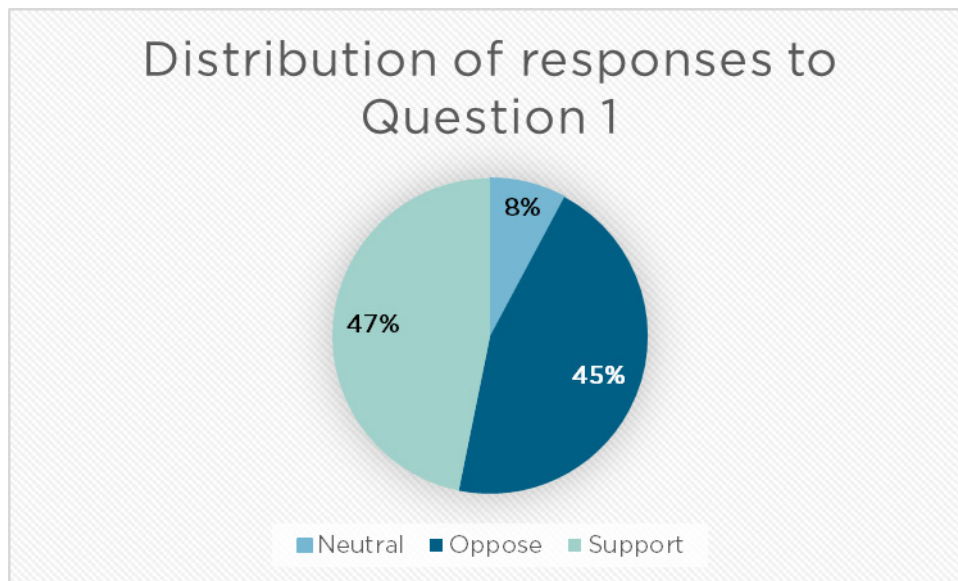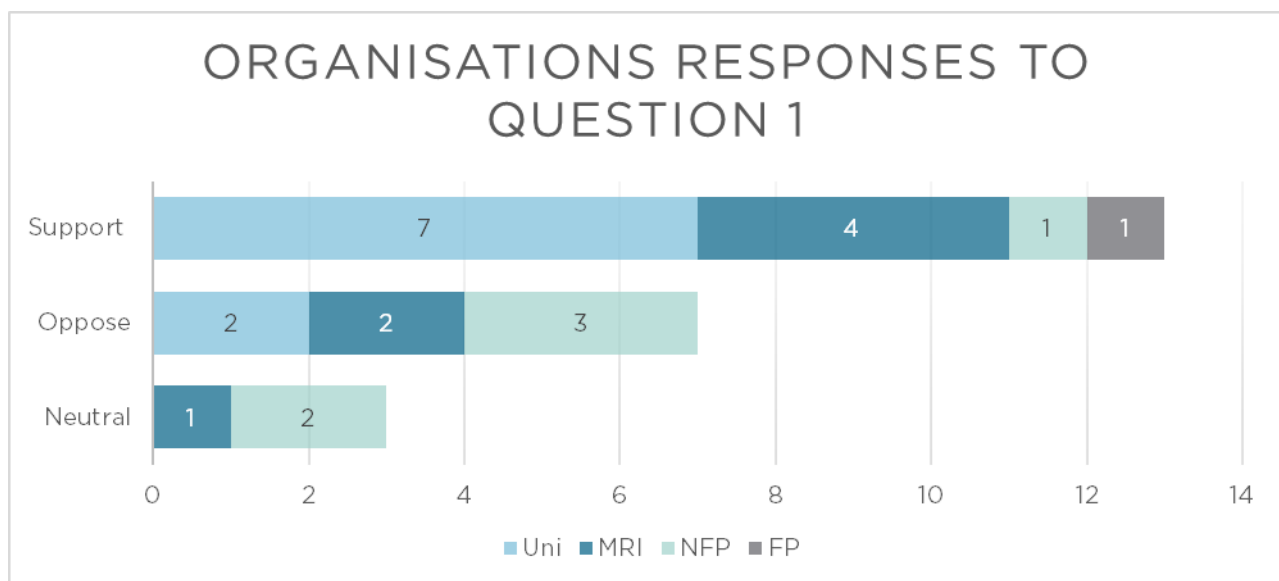

Figure 16. Distribution of organisations' responses to Eligibility Barrier Question 1

*Uni – university, MRI – medical research institution, NFP – not for profit and FP – for profit

EL Eligibility Barrier Question 2

> Please provide any comments you have in relation to this proposal (e.g. support, reservations or considerations for implementation) (free text responses).
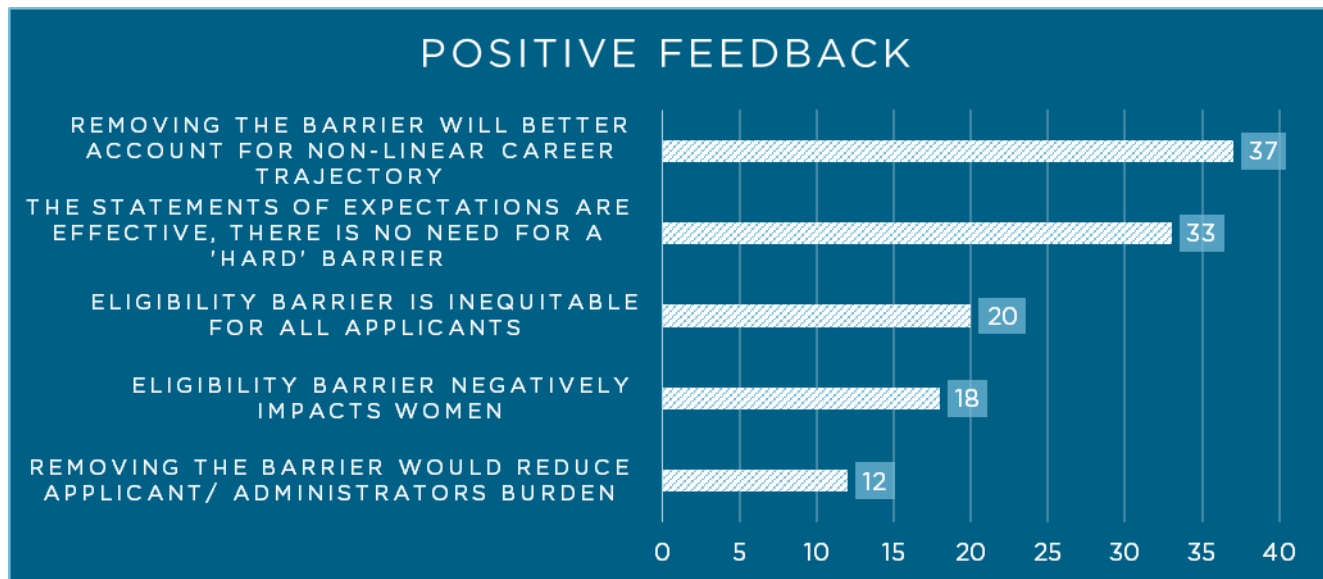
There were 200 free text responses. Among these, 118 responses (59%) provided positive feedback, as highlighted by 2 respondents:

"I strongly agree to remove this eligibility barrier. Some people, like myself, have carer's responsibilities, which may slow down research impact, even though we're still contributing to the pathway towards impact."

"The barrier disadvantages women with children who work part-time by making it less clear whether they are EMCRs. The barrier also disadvantages those with non-research experience (i.e. clinical experience)."
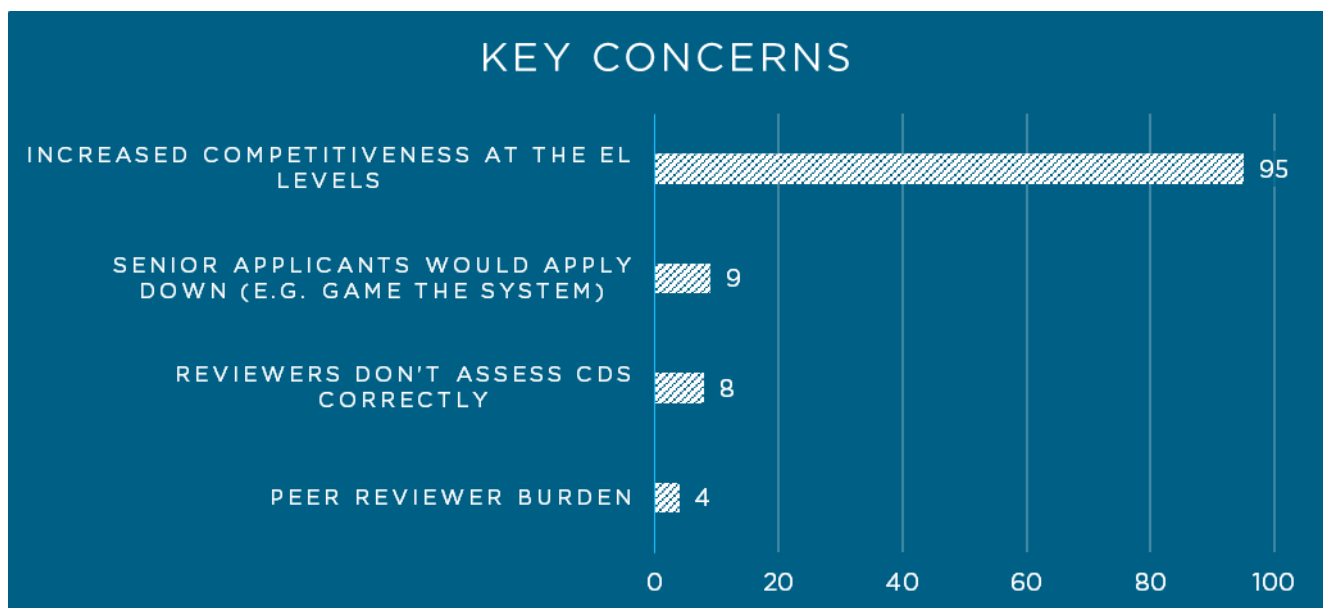
Positive feedback was clustered into 2 categories, as illustrated in **Figure 17**.

Figure 17. Key positive feedback raised by respondents

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

- REMOVING THE BARRIER WILL BETTER ACCOUNT FOR NON-LINEAR CAREER TRAJECTORY — 37
- THE STATEMENTS OF EXPECTATIONS ARE EFFECTIVE, THERE IS NO NEED FOR A 'HARD' BARRIER — 33
- ELIGIBILITY BARRIER IS INEQUITABLE FOR ALL APPLICANTS — 20
- ELIGIBILITY BARRIER NEGATIVELY IMPACTS WOMEN — 18
- REMOVING THE BARRIER WOULD REDUCE APPLICANT/ ADMINISTRATORS BURDEN — 12

Concerns were clustered into 4 categories, as illustrated in **Figure 18**.

Figure 18. Key concerns raised by respondents who disagreed with Question 2 statement

KEY CONCERNS

- INCREASED COMPETITIVENESS AT THE EL LEVELS — 95
- SENIOR APPLICANTS WOULD APPLY DOWN (E.G. GAME THE SYSTEM) — 9
- REVIEWERS DON'T ASSESS CDS CORRECTLY — 8
- PEER REVIEWER BURDEN — 4

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Among respondents who did not support the change, the overwhelming majority spoke to the increased competitiveness at the EL category and concern senior applicants would apply down. As highlighted by a respondent:

"Removing the barrier would encourage people who should be applying at the Leadership 1 level to instead apply at the Emerging Leadership 2 level. This will make the Emerging Leadership categories even more competitive than they already are, which would severely disadvantage early career researchers."

Discussion and next steps

The overall outcomes from the public consultation illustrated strong support for some of the key changes (see page 2 for **Executive summary**).

NHMRC will consider the findings of the public consultation when finalising the grant opportunity guidelines for future rounds of Investigator and Synergy Grants in consultation with the Working Group, Research Committee and other relevant NHMRC Committees. Supported changes will be implemented for the Investigator Grants 2026 round, expected to open in June 2025. NHMRC anticipates publishing a Forecast Opportunity on GrantConnect earlier in the year to support applicants and RAOs.

Most respondents demonstrated an understanding of the proposed updates, however some indicated uncertainty or a lack of clarity. To support understanding across all stakeholder groups, NHMRC will develop additional communications to share information about the ongoing work to improve the Investigator Grant scheme and assessment of research impact. These can be tailored to specific audiences, including RAOs, applicants and peer reviewers.

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