



COMMUNIQUE – REVISED RELATIVE TO OPPORTUNITY POLICY

1 February 2021

NHMRC has revised its Relative to Opportunity Policy based on feedback from its expert advisory committees and the research sector. The revised policy clarifies ‘relative to opportunity’ considerations, including personal situations such as disability and unemployment, and builds on changes announced on [4 August 2020](#) to recognise the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other calamities.

NHMRC will also trial a new approach to assessment of ‘relative to opportunity’ considerations in the 2021 Investigator Grant round by taking into account the individual career context and life circumstances of all applicants in track record assessment.

Context

NHMRC relies on expert peer review to identify the highest quality research that will lead to improvements in health over the short or long term. In most NHMRC grant schemes, peer reviewers are asked to assess the track record of the applicants as well as the proposed research. NHMRC recognises that not all research careers are the same and therefore peer reviewers are asked to assess track records ‘relative to opportunity’, taking into account circumstances that have affected the applicant’s research productivity.

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.

The policy has two components:

1. Career Disruption – a prolonged interruption (≥ 90 days full-time equivalent) to the ability to work due to pregnancy, major illness/injury and/or carer responsibilities. Career Disruptions are taken into account in track record assessment and in determining an applicant’s eligibility to hold an Emerging Leadership Investigator Grant (in terms of years since they received their PhD).
2. Other Relative to Opportunity considerations – any other circumstances affecting research productivity for track record assessment.

Review of the policy and basis for changes

Based on feedback received from public consultations on peer review for its new grant program, feedback from researchers, consultations with its advisory committees and internal analyses, NHMRC identified a need to review the Relative to Opportunity Policy so that it continues to meet its stated objectives.

The review, which considered similar policies of national and international counterparts, identified scope to improve the policy by:

- Broadening its scope to account explicitly for the breadth of life circumstances (including calamities such as COVID-19 and personal circumstances such as disability)
- Providing additional guidance on how applicants should address relative to opportunity considerations (including Career Disruptions) in their grant applications and how peer reviewers should take them into account in their assessments
- Considering the broader context and outcomes of career circumstances rather than only the impediments, e.g. spending time in Indigenous communities, industry and clinical service could be beneficial.

The key changes

Informed by the review, the Relative to Opportunity Policy has been revised by categorising and updating reference to the circumstances often affecting researchers, including personal situations such as disability and unemployment. Applicants can, however, outline any circumstance that has affected their productivity for consideration in track record assessment, as circumstances listed in the policy are only a guide and not an exhaustive list.

NOTE: No change has been made to the Career Disruption component of the policy.

NHMRC will also trial a new approach to assessment of Relative to Opportunity in the 2021 Investigator Grant scheme, requiring all applicants to provide:

- A career context summary describing their individual circumstances and opportunities for research and how these circumstances have positively and/or negatively affected their research productivity
- Additional structured information on their career stage, career history, career disruptions and research (in)active periods.

This approach is intended to ensure that each applicant's track record and associated productivity are considered in the context of their specific career circumstances. It will reinforce the objective that all applicants must be assessed relative to opportunity, as researchers have diverse careers and life circumstances. Noting that applicants can nominate any circumstance impacting productivity, at a minimum these considerations will include the applicant's research role(s) and responsibilities, career stage, amount of time spent as an active researcher and the typical performance of researchers in the field.

The following guidance to Investigator Grant applicants and peer reviewers has been developed:

- Information that could be included in the Career Overview and hypothetical examples of Career Context statements (spanning different research career stages and circumstances) – see the Guide to Applicants Appendix of the Investigator Grants 2021 Guidelines, which will be released on [GrantConnect](#) shortly
- How peer reviewers should take applicant information into account during assessment – see the Investigator Grants 2021 Peer Review Guidelines, which will be released on the [2021 Investigator Grants funding webpage](#) shortly.

Implementation and evaluation

The revised Relative to Opportunity Policy will apply to all NHMRC schemes involving track record assessment that open on or after 1 February 2021.

NHMRC will work with its advisory committees to evaluate the trial approach to assessment of Relative to Opportunity in the 2021 Investigator Grant round. The evaluation will inform the broader implementation of this approach across NHMRC schemes for the 2022 funding round.

Relevant links

1. [Revised NHMRC Relative to Opportunity Policy](#)